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CLIP, THE CONTORTIONIST; or, The Vigilantes of Montana.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "THE TYPO DETECTIVE," "FEARLESS PHIL," "THE ROVING SPORT," ETC., ETC.



SHORTLY HE HALTED, LOWERED HIMSELF UNTIL HIS FACE NEARLY TOUCHED THE GROUND, AND THEN BOTH HIS FEET SHOT OUT NEARLY AT A RIGHT ANGLE, STRIKING THE BULL-SLINGER IN THE STOMACH WITH TREMENDOUS FORCE.

Clip, the Contortionist;

OR,
The Vigilantes of Montana.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "NEMO, THE DETECTIVE," "THE ROVING SPORT," "FEARLESS PHIL," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FREE SHOW.

THE new and thriving settlement of Orodia, not a hundred miles from Virginia City, could hardly have been called young, as it seemed to have sprung into existence without being born, and to have been old from the start.

But there was not much of it as yet.

Almost the entire extent of the lovely little basin previously known as Grass Valley had been seized upon by speculators and laid off in building lots; but there had been few houses erected, most of the inhabitants dwelling in tents and in shanties that had been hastily thrown together.

This would, of course, be greatly changed in a few weeks, as prairie schooners were daily arriving, and loads of lumber had been contracted for, and a brick-yard was about to be started.

It will be understood that Orodia was, as yet, a small settlement, when it is stated that there were only two saloons in the place.

Both were mere shanties; but each was doing a rushing business and paying a heavy percentage on the capital invested.

One of them hung out a flaming sign as "The Bon Ton," and the other advertised itself as "The Stunner."

The latter, though the latest arrival, had become the more popular of the two, partly because its name better suited the ranchmen and miners and railroad hands, and partly because its proprietor was a woman, who was known as Miss Nettle.

One hot afternoon in July, when the sun seemed to have a special spite against Grass Valley, a dozen or more red and blue-shirted men, bearded and bronzed, among whom coats were scarce and high boots abounded, were gathered in front of the Stunner, listening to a casual discourse from Sam Bunker, a tall and brawny bull-slinger from the Divide, as the high ridge was styled that separated Grass Valley from Roaring Fork Gulch.

The subject of Sam Bunker's oration was Vigilantes, an organization of that character having made itself severely felt in the region about Virginia City.

It was a subject in which he must have been intensely interested, as he harangued his audience with such energy and emphasis that the perspiration fairly rolled down his cheeks and soaked into his beard.

"Tell ye what it is, feller-citizens," said he, "them Vigilantys ain't no sort of an American institution. They're imported from Mexico and ole Californy. Thar's whar ye find 'em in full leaf an' blossom, an' they hain't got no call to set up in this yer enlightened land. It's part o' the Constitution o' these yer United States that every man has a right to a fair trial; but the Vigilantys don't give nobody no sort of a show. They do thar dirty work in secret, an' go about with masks on, like the wust kind o' road-agents. When they've got any spite or ill-will ag'inst a feller, they pounce on him of a sudden, an' send him to Kingdom Come without jedge or jury."

"Have they worried you any yet, Sam?" asked one of the audience.

"No, indeed. If you or anybody else thinks that they've got a call to worry me, jest step forrud an' give us the pints. This ain't no personal matter with me feller-citizens. But they'd better not fool with Sam Bunker. If they try it on, some of 'em 'll be apt to pass in thar chips mighty quick. They've worried a heap, though. Last night they strung up Bill Seddons, over at Roarin' Fork, jest because of a leetle mistake he made in the way of cattle. No, they hain't worried me, but thar's no tellin' when it may come my turn, or any o' the rest of us. I say ag'in, feller-citizens, that the Vigilanty business ain't American, an' it ain't fair an' honest, an' I'm ag'in' it, hide an' horns, tooth an' toenail. Let's go an' liquor."

This style of winding up the oration was applauded; but just then something else attracted Sam Bunker's attention.

Walking down the middle of the road came a young man who had scarcely more than reached the age of manhood, judging by the down on his cheek and the faint mustache on his upper lip.

His slenderness might have caused him to appear taller than he actually was, had it not been for a bend in his back that always made him look as if he was leaning forward. But his broad shoulders spoke of strength, and his length was mainly to be found in his arms and legs, which swung and wobbled about when he walked as if they were taking exercise on their own account.

In his attire he was a little peculiar, wearing a cardigan jacket that fitted him closely, a blue flannel shirt, trousers over the bottoms of which brown woolen stockings were drawn, and well-fitting shoes instead of the heavy boots that were the fashion in that region. A brown skull-cap with a small red tassel, did not in the least protect his face from the sun, and his deeply-bronzed cheeks and black hair might easily have caused him to be mistaken for an Indian.

"Swing me up if thar ain't Clip Saunders!" exclaimed the man from the Divide. "Whar has he been keeping hisself lately? I'd somehow lost sight of him."

"He's been stayin' out at Mat Warner's," remarked a bystander.

Sam Bunker scowled, as if there was something displeasing to him connected with that name, and beckoned to the young man.

"Here, Clip! Come here to me! I want to take a look at ye."

Clip Saunders halted, but hesitated, as if not inclined to accept the invitation.

"Come here, I say!" ordered Bunker. "Durn yer or'nary hide, I mean what I shout! Do ye want to git hurt?"

An almost idiotic smile passed over the face of the young man, and with a hop, skip and a jump, he landed in the midst of the crowd in front of the Stunner.

"Come in with us, Clip, and help us liquor up," said Sam Bunker. "Then I will want ye to show these fellows what ye kin do."

The man from the Divide was liberal in his order for "setting 'em up," and Clip was invited to join the thirsty crowd; but neither persuasions nor threats could induce him to do so.

When they had duly poisoned themselves, they adjourned to the street, where Bunker formed them in a ring to witness the expected performance.

"Pitch in now, Clip, an' give us a good show," ordered the man from the Divide. "Put in yer best licks, or it'll be a sore set o' bones you'll have to carry home."

The lad suddenly threw himself into the air, turning a somersault, and alighting on his feet.

"Purty good fur a beginnin', young feller. Twist yerself around lively, now, and I'll take up a collection fur ye when the show's over."

Clip Saunders dropped on his back on the ground, and twisted himself into a variety of shapes, closing the act by putting his legs around his neck and clasping his hands over his forehead.

"Ain't that bully?" exclaimed Bunker. "He's a hull circus in hisself. Durn my skin if I hain't got a big notion o' takin' him out an' startin' a show. Give us the roll-over now, Clip, an' make 'em open thar eyes."

The lad put himself into his last position, and rolled over several times like a ball.

But this performance was not entirely satisfactory to the man from the Divide.

"Give us some more of it," he ordered. "Lively, now—lively!"

He had drawn a knife from his belt, and enforced his command by pricking the Contortionist until the blood came.

A young man stepped forward, whose attire was rather more neat and complete than that of the others.

He was Harry Venn, who had been employed on the survey of the railroad route before Orodia was started, and who was then engaged on its construction.

"Put up that knife," said he. "You must not hurt the boy."

"Git out!" shouted Bunker. "I don't take no orders from railroad sharps."

"Don't make any fuss, Harry," said the lad. "I ain't hurt a bit. I like to do it—indeed I do. Now, folks, you shall see me walk on my hands."

He threw himself upon his hands, elevated his feet in the air, and marched toward the man from the Divide, the crowd applauding him.

Shortly he halted, lowered himself until his face nearly touched the ground, and then both his feet shot out nearly at a right angle, striking the bull-slinger in the stomach with tremendous force.

The man from the Divide doubled up and

tumbled over, while Clip ran away swiftly, followed by roars of laughter.

Sam Bunker was completely knocked out of time, and it was some minutes before he could recover his breath.

Then he sat up and scowled at the by-standers, who had not ceased to grin at his mishap.

"Is anybody larfin'?" he hoarsely demanded.

Instantly all the faces were straight and solemn.

Then he rose to his feet and glared about savagely.

"Whar's that cussed railroad sharp that tried to interfere with me? Lemme git at him an' put a streak o' daylight through his skull."

Harry Venn faced him, with his hand on the butt of a revolver.

The bystanders moved aside as if they expected an immediate and deadly combat.

But another person pushed forward, and it was no less important a person than the proprietress of the Stunner.

Miss Nettle was a stout, plump, and red-faced, but not hard-featured, woman of uncertain age, whose calico dress was gay with bits of red ribbon, and whose head was gorgeous with a bang.

She planted herself between the belligerents, but faced the man from the Divide.

"You may jest go right along, Sam Bunker," she said. "Thar ain't gwine to be no fightin' in the Stunner, or about it, so long as my name's Susan Nettle. Put up yer shooters, both of you, and simmer down, less you want to have trouble with me."

She was at once obeyed, as if it was a matter of course.

"I'll be the death o' that young guttiperch yet," muttered Sam Bunker as he walked away.

CHAPTER II.

A BIT OF A BEAR-FIGHT.

MATTHEW WARNER had a well built and roomy house on his ranch, which occupied—the ranch, not the house—the whole of a valley in the hills, remote from any settlement or habitation.

There was plenty of rich bottom-land in the valley for raising crops, and plenty of good upland for grazing, and Mat Warner was monarch of all he surveyed. As a matter of fact, the hills shut out the view of any property but his own.

His outbuildings, as well as his house, were extensive and in good order, and his cattle and crops, which were surpassed by none, brought him a good income.

Matthew Warner was a man of middle age and medium size, quiet by nature, cool and cautious and wary, a good husband and father, and reputed to be thoroughly honest in word and deed.

The rest of his family were his wife, one of the most pleasant and kindly of women, and his daughter Helen, a fresh-faced, bright-eyed and handsome girl of nearly twenty, lithe and graceful, active, and apparently tireless, as well she might be, considering that she and her mother had all the woman's work of the ranch to do.

The other occupants of the premises were three good and reliable men who assisted Mat Warner with the cattle and the crops, and last, but not least in the estimation of the Warner family, Clip Saunders, who had lately become an inmate of the house.

The proprietor was seated in the common room, which Mrs. Warner chose to style the parlor, smoking his pipe placidly, while Helen sat at the open window and looked out at the growing darkness, and her mother was busy with her everlasting mending and darning.

It was late when he came in—nearly night—as it was a long distance to Orodia, and he never rode, but trusted to his feet, which got him over the ground very rapidly.

They brightened up when he entered the house, and he was greeted with smiles.

"You are late, Clip," said Mat Warner. "We have all had supper, down to the dogs, and I am afraid you will have to eat yours in the kitchen."

"Not a bit of it," replied his wife, who had already laid aside her work. "He shall have his supper here, and the best there is in the house."

"That's right, Fanny. Nothing is too good for the lad who saved our Nelly's life when she fell from the ledge into the big pool at Roaring Fork."

Mrs. Warner and Helen bustled about together, and soon had supper on the table for

Clip, and a very good supper it was, smoking hot, and with steaming and fragrant coffee.

As the lad sat at the table he related his adventure in Orodia, and it is to be remarked that he used good language and showed no such idiotic grin as he had displayed when Sam Bunker called him.

Nelly and her mother were greatly amused by the recital; but Mat Warner seemed to regard it as a serious matter.

"You have made an enemy of that man, Clip," said he, "and Sam Bunker is one of the worst subjects in these parts."

"I'm not afraid of him, sir. I would never have done a thing he told me to do if I hadn't meant to wind it up just as I did."

"He is a dangerous man, I tell you, and how are you to defend yourself against him? You never carry a weapon."

"Don't I, though? What do you call this?"

He drew from a sheath at his back a long and sharp knife. The handle, too, was longer than that of the ordinary knife, and was heavily weighted with lead.

"If you should see me throw this at a mark," he said, "you would think I had a weapon. A rifle could get away with me, but at any reasonable distance this would be good against a pistol."

"Put it away, Clip," begged Mrs. Warner. "It looks murderous."

"It may prove to be murderous sometime, if anybody tackles me who means murder. But I have not told you quite all of that little affair at the settlement. There was somebody there who stepped forward to take my part. I didn't need any help; but there was somebody who was ready to help me, and who do you think it was?"

There were no guessers.

"Somebody that Miss Nelly knows," remarked Clip.

"Harry Venn," suggested Mrs. Warner, and Helen blushed and turned her face toward the window.

"That's just who it was, and a fine young chap he is, to my notion. I would hate to have him get into any difficulty on my account."

Matthew Warner had been smoking reflectively and looking closely at Clip.

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and spoke up quickly:

"Clip Saunders, where did you come from?"

"Down Kansas way," answered the lad, after a slight hesitation.

"Have you no folks—no relations?"

"I believe not. I had a sister once."

His dark face grew darker as he spoke.

"What has become of her, Clip?"

"She—well, sir, she's dead."

"And now you are all alone in the world. What brought you into this country?"

The lad fidgeted on his seat, and hesitated again before he answered.

"I was sort of looking for something, sir."

"For something, or for somebody?"

"I don't like to talk about it, Mr. Warner. It is enough to have it to think about."

"I am done. I don't want to get at your secrets, Clip, if you have any. I asked you those questions only because we all take such an interest in you."

Clip had stepped to the door, and was looking out at the night.

It was not very dark, as the light of a young moon came faintly through the clouds.

"Hark! What's that?" said the lad, as he leaned forward and listened.

He had heard an unusual noise, and directly his ears were saluted by the unmistakable squealing of swine.

"There's a bear at the pig pen, or a wildcat," said he.

Mat Warner seized his repeating-rifle, and ran out closely followed by Clip.

The horse-lot was a large inclosure at a little distance from the house, surrounded by a high stake-and-ridered fence. In one corner was a log pen, which contained at the time several young pigs.

As Mr. Warner and Clip entered the lot the squealing continued, and they saw a dark form coming over the top log of the pen.

As they came nearer they plainly perceived that it was a large bear with a pig in his clutch.

Mr. Warner raised his rifle when he was within easy shooting distance, and fired; but the brute was turning at the moment, and was only slightly wounded by the shot.

It dropped the pig, and rushed toward its assailant.

Mr. Warner stood his ground to try another shot; but the shell of the spent cartridge had

caught, and the breech of the rifle would not work.

Before he could get it in order the bear had reached him, and had raised itself on its hind-legs for a death-hug.

His position was perilous, and he started to run, just a little too late to save himself.

But he was not alone.

A surer weapon was at hand.

Clip's heavy-handled knife flew through the air, and the long and sharp blade sunk in the breast of the bear to the hilt.

The brute clutched at the handle, but only succeeded in driving the blade deeper.

It fell on its back, and rolled over and over, struggling to tear out the fatal knife, but made its condition worse, as the blood gushed forth in a stream.

Clip stood near, calmly watching the agonies of the animal, and Mr. Warner, who had got his rifle in working order, sent a bullet into the brute's brain, and put an end to the excitement.

The ranch hands, who had been hurried out by Mrs. Warner and Helen, came running up in time to get the job of dragging away the bear, and caring for the carcass.

Clip drew out his knife and wiped it; but there was still blood on it when he returned to the house.

"Clip has saved my life as well as Nelly's," said Matthew Warner, when he had related to the women the adventure with the bear.

"Not as bad as that," replied the lad.

"I was in a very tight place though, and it might have been much worse but for your help. I am willing to admit now that you have a weapon, and that it is a right good one."

"My knife has tasted blood," said Clip. "I hope it may never be red with any blood but that of a brute."

"There are other brutes than those that go on four legs," remarked Mat Warner.

CHAPTER III.

A SUITOR FOR HELEN.

THE morning after the encounter with the bear Clip Saunders was standing in front of the house, when a horseman appeared at the lower end of the valley, having evidently come through the gap that afforded communication with the outside world.

He stepped inside, and reported the unusual occurrence to Mrs. Warner and Helen.

"Who do you suppose it is, Clip?" asked the former.

"I don't suppose. I know."

"Who is it, then?"

"Spence Symmes."

Helen turned pale, and her mother looked at her curiously.

"Do you know him, Nelly?" she inquired.

"I don't know him; but I have seen him. I have met him, or he has met me, and he has tried to speak to me. He has such a rude and forward way that I hate him, and I don't want to see him again."

"He will want to see your father, I suppose. Do you know where Mr. Warner is, Clip?"

"I think he is not far away."

"I wish you would go and find him."

Clip hastened to do this errand; but before he returned the stranger reached the house, and Mrs. Warner had a good look at him as he rode up.

Spencer Symmes, commonly known as Spence Symmes, was not a person at whom, judging by his outward appearance, young women would be likely to shudder.

He was a man who might be anywhere between thirty and forty years of age, and was fine-looking, if not actually handsome, with regular features, clean-shaven face, except a very conspicuous mustache, long and dark hair, that he usually kept well oiled and combed, and a swarthy complexion.

He was, moreover, tall and well-built, and sought to increase his attractions by dressing in the extreme of the border-dandy style.

But there was at times, and pretty frequently, "a lurking devil in his eye," that warned women and men alike to beware of him.

He dismounted from his fine and gayly-caparisoned black horse, and entered the house with a smiling and confident air.

Mrs. Warner received him politely, Helen having retreated in time to the kitchen.

He started a not very lively conversation on the weather and other commonplace topics, and had not progressed far when Mat Warner came in, followed by Clip.

The ranchman "looked him over," as was his custom with people who were strangers or comparatively so, and Spence Symmes was evi-

dently uneasy under that keen and inquisitive gaze.

"I hope you have sized me up to suit you," he remarked. "I hope, too, that I am not an intruder here."

"Not a bit of it," replied Mr. Warner. "Everybody is welcome here who comes on a peaceful errand, and I presume that your errand is of course a peaceful one."

"It is more than peaceful; it is friendly. I will spit it right out, if you please, as I am a square man, and everything is open and above-board with me. I have come to speak to you about your daughter."

Mat Warner was astonished if not a little shocked.

"My daughter?" he exclaimed. "What is the matter with my daughter?"

"Nothing in the world is the matter with her. She is everything that is sweet and lovely and attractive, and that's what's the matter with me. I haven't seen much of her yet, and have had scarcely a chance to speak to her; but I am dead gone and that's a solid fact, Cap."

"Dead gone?" repeated Mr. Warner, as if he did not understand the meaning of the phrase.

"You know what I mean—dead in love with her—and I thought it would be the proper and genteel thing to ride over and ask you if I may come here and visit her."

"I suppose that is the proper and genteel thing, Mr. Symmes. But you would of course want to come and visit her with a purpose, and I don't know enough about you to say yes to that. What business or occupation do you follow?"

"Oh, I am a prospector and a speculator. I speculate mostly in mining property."

"Are you settled anywhere?"

"Can't say that I am. My business is not of the settled kind. If I don't strike a lead that suits me I buy a mine that promises well, and stock it up or sell it right out. That keeps me on the go, you see."

"It is too unsteady and uncertain a business to suit me, Mr. Symmes. But the girl is the one to be consulted, and I will tell her what you say. Where is she, Fanny?"

"Don't bother her, Mat," replied Mrs. Warner. "That is not the way to do."

"I think it is. It is best to have a plain understanding. Where is Nelly?"

"You will find her in the kitchen, I believe."

Mr. Warner stepped out, and soon returned with Helen.

She was not blushing, as a girl might be expected to at the appearance of an avowed suitor; but her face was pale, and her lips were compressed, as if she felt that she had an unpleasant task to perform.

"This stranger," said her father, "at least he is a stranger to me—has come here on a court-ing errand, and of course you are the object of it. He wants to know whether it will be worth while for him to continue coming on that errand."

Helen's face showed that she was troubled; but her mother's distress was the more visible.

Spence Symmes had put on his most attractive look and his brightest smile.

"Can you not answer for me, father?" she pleaded.

"It is your business, my child, and I prefer that you should answer for yourself."

"It goes hard with me to say anything that might displease anybody," she said; "but I can only say that it would be quite useless for the gentleman to come here on that errand, and that I hope he will not."

Spencer Symmes scowled, rather than frowned, and "the lurking devil" rose in his eye.

He was not accustomed to being treated so coolly by any woman, and had not expected such a rebuff.

"Perhaps," said he, "somebody has copied the card that I had put my chips on."

"What is that?" demanded Mr. Warner. "I really don't understand you at all."

"I mean to say that perhaps somebody else has stepped in before me and taken her fancy. Is that so, Miss Warner?"

"You have no right to ask me such a question," she coldly answered.

"I can answer it for myself, though. I would like to know why it is that you are down on me."

"I am not down on you, sir, if I know what you mean by that expression."

"It seems to me that you folks don't understand plain talk."

"It seems to me that we talk plainly enough."

though," interposed Mat Warner. "My daughter has said that she prefers not to accept you as a suitor, and that question is settled. I gave her no advice on the point; but I am free to say that my opinion agrees with hers."

The visitor rose from his chair, and stepped toward the door.

The devil in his eye was no longer lurking, but came forward in plain sight, and showed its full stature.

"You have said that I am a stranger to you, Mat Warner," said he; "but you will be likely to know a good deal more about me before you are through with me."

"That sounds like a threat," replied the ranchman. "You have no right to threaten us, as we have treated you politely and have done you no harm."

"Take it as you please. I am a straight and square man; but I have a head of my own. I offered to do the fair thing, but was refused a chance. I mean to come here, all the same, but will suit myself in coming, and when I do come you may have cause to wish that I had stayed away."

He left the house without another word, mounted his horse, and rode down the valley.

Mrs. Warner was greatly distressed by this episode, and her husband looked as if he would gladly have got along without it.

"That is a dangerous man, I am afraid," he remarked.

"You are right about that, sir," said Clip Saunders. "I doubt if there is a more dangerous man anywhere about here. What did he say he was—a prospector and a speculator? He speculates in faro and poker, and he prospects in other people's pockets. Spence Symmes is a mighty safe man to keep away from."

"It is a pity that we should have made an enemy of him," said Mrs. Warner.

"That couldn't be helped," replied her husband. "We did right, and he himself has proved that we did. It is better that he should be an open enemy than an unsafe friend."

CHAPTER IV.

CHEYENNE CHARLEY.

JUDGE WALLER was one of the magnates of Orodia. There were not many magnates there yet, and it was easy for him to be the top of the heap; but he was the kind of man who might be expected to stay at the top.

He had been a judge in Virginia City, and the title had stuck to him after he had left the bench and turned his attention to the founding of a new city.

Lots in Orodia were going off like hot cakes, and Judge Waller was busy and prosperous.

But business was over for the day, when he sat in his office one evening, cleaning up his desk preparatory to closing his neat little white-washed office.

Consequently he was a little surprised when a stranger stepped in.

This stranger was a tall and brawny man, rather roughly dressed, unshaven, considerably travel-worn, and looking as if he had just come in from an extensive tramp.

Judge Waller's keen gray eyes "sized him up" at once, and as he resumed his seat at his desk he partly opened a drawer in which lay a cocked revolver.

He invited the stranger to be seated, and inquired his business.

"Is this Judge Waller?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Lived a long time in these parts, I understand."

"Rather long, considering that this is a new country."

"Lived in Virginia City, and been a judge."

"Yes."

"Reckon you know who's who and what's goin' on about as well as most anybody."

"I am largely acquainted and pretty well posted."

"Well, judge, what I want to get at is this. I am told that you have Vigilantes in these parts."

"So I have heard," replied Judge Waller.

"Of course you ain't one of them, and you don't know who they are, or anything more about them than anybody else does. But I've a notion that if a stranger should want a sound and square opinion about what he ought to do to keep out of trouble, you would be likely to give it to him."

"I can give my opinion, of course."

"Well, judge, how would those Vigilantes be apt to treat a rough citizen who should come here and want to settle and go straight?"

"I don't believe they would trouble any man

who is disposed to behave himself. Are you that sort of a citizen?"

"I may say that I am. Where I came from I was known as Cheyenne Charley."

"And your real name is Charles Rentz."

"Hullo, judge! So you know me?"

"You have been something of a public character," answered Judge Waller, with a smile.

"Durned if I ever struck you before, though."

"Perhaps it is as well for you that you did not. Let me see. You left Cheyenne in a hurry, because of a difficulty you had there, in which a man died."

"Yes. The people there got sorter prejudiced against me, and I took a change of venue, as you lawyers say."

"But without leave of the court. Your last exploit was in the southeastern part of this Territory, where you went honestly to work at herding cattle on a ranch. One morning the ranchman missed you and a pretty big pile of gold coin."

"He got his money back, though."

"That was because he chased you up so sharp."

"Well, judge, you seem to know as much about that sort of thing as if you was one of the Vigilantes yourself, and your opinion must be worth something. Do you think, now, that they will leave me alone if I settle down and go straight?"

"I am quite sure that nobody will trouble you as long as you are peaceable and well behaved."

"Much obliged to you, judge. Ever so much obliged. Good-evening."

Judge Waller looked after his visitor as he slowly sauntered up the one street of Orodia.

"I don't believe that that man could go straight if he tried," said he, "and I am sure that he don't mean to try. He wanted to get on the blind side of me—that's all."

The judge beckoned to a young man who stepped out from the shade of a tree-trunk.

"Follow that man, Clip, and notice where he goes and what he does."

"All right, sir."

Cheyenne Charley strolled into Miss Nettle's saloon, the Stunner, and Clip Saunders followed him.

That hostelry was pretty well filled with men, although it was yet early in the evening, and its frequenters were gradually filling themselves with the contents of the bottles in the bar.

The gentleman from Cheyenne watched this operation with longing eyes, and looked about in vain for an opportunity to satisfy his thirst.

But he was a stranger, and nobody asked him to specify his poison, and he knew well enough that he could not get trusted there for a thimbleful.

His hands went down in his pockets again and again; but they did not bring forth from those vacant depths as much as the smallest coin.

Mr. Charles Rentz was flat broke, and his condition was almost unendurable.

After awhile he slightly raised his right hand, closing his fist with the exception of the forefinger, which he bent and held in that position.

He did this several times, as if casually, and finally attracted the attention of a man who approached him, and that man was Spence Symmes.

Symmes went through the same motions with his right hand, and then the two stepped a little aside from the others, and spoke in a low tone.

"C R O," whispered the man from Cheyenne.

"O K," answered Spence Symmes in a similar whisper.

Then they shook hands.

Their mysterious whispers had been inaudible to everybody but themselves, with the exception of Clip Saunders, who had taken pains to get in a position that would allow him to listen, and whose sense of hearing was unusually acute.

"Do you want anything?" asked Symmes.

"You can bet I do," replied the other. "I am dead broke—dead and buried, with a tombstone on top."

A gold piece passed from the pocket of Symmes to the hand of Cheyenne Charley.

"We are going to make a big strike soon, and you will have a chance in," said Symmes.

"Take care of yourself now, and keep a level head, and don't get into trouble, and I will see you in the morning."

"All right," responded his companion, and Spence Symmes quietly left the saloon.

But Cheyenne Charley soon forgot the assurance of level-headedness that he had given.

It was long since he had known the luxury of a real, rearing, tearing, rampageous spree.

Worse than that, days had passed since he had tasted liquor.

He was fairly freezing for it, and he had money in his pocket, and the supply of aquafortis was abundant.

Therefore he set at work in earnest to make up for lost time, and in a little while was on familiar terms with most of the men in the saloon, treating and being treated.

He fired up so frequently and so heavily that he became belligerent, as it was his nature to, and then he proceeded to pick a quarrel, which was easy enough at that time and place.

The quarrel was rapidly passing from the wordy stage to the fighting stage, when the proprietress whispered to Clip Saunders.

"Do try to quiet 'em," she said; "that's a dear boy."

"Clear the way!" shouted Clip at the top of his voice. "The performance is about to begin!"

This was a welcome announcement, as most of those present knew what it meant, and a clear space was quickly made in the middle of the room, the belligerents being unceremoniously hustled aside and separated.

Clip immediately began rolling and tumbling, throwing somersaults, posing himself in the most extraordinary attitudes, and twisting himself into the most impossible positions.

He kept this up for ten minutes, and was rewarded with the most uproarious applause.

Miss Nettle beckoned to the man from Cheyenne, and laid her heavy hand on his shoulder.

"I don't allow no fightin'," she said. "If you try it ag'in, I'll have to take a hand and bounce you."

"I believe you could do it," answered Cheyenne Charley, who had cooled down.

"She kin do it, stranger, and that's a solid fact," remarked a big bystander. "Ef she can't, thar's plenty to help her."

The stranger took the hint, and subsided into a chair, where he soaked his clay in silence until he fell asleep.

Clip Saunders sought Judge Waller, to whom he reported what he had seen and heard.

"We ought to understand that," said the judge. "Putting this and that together, it seems to be plain enough. C R O and O K—that spells CROOK, which is a good enough watchword for men of their style."

"Crooks they both are," remarked Clip.

"Yes, and I am afraid that there is going to be trouble, and somebody will get hurt, and hemp will be in demand. By the way, have you any news yet concerning that affair of yours?"

"No, sir."

"I am afraid you are on a blind trail, my boy."

"Blind enough, but I believe that the man is somewhere about here."

CHAPTER V.

THE VIGILANTES' NOTICE.

CHEYENNE CHARLEY was duly put to bed in the Stunner at a late hour, and in the morning Spence Symmes came and aroused him from his heavy slumber.

The man who was going to turn over a new leaf objected to this interruption; but his new friend consoled him with several drinks, gave him a breakfast, and then put him on a horse and took him away from Orodia.

"You have been making a condemned fool of yourself, old man," said Symmes, as they rode along. "You got drunk, after I cautioned you not to, and started in to raise a row. Luckily, you were not allowed to go far, or you might have been buried in your boots before now."

"I was powerful dry," protested the other. "Hain't got outside of a square drink for days, and the stuff went to my head."

"You had better leave it alone if you can't manage it better than that. I knew who you were, Charley, as soon as I saw you, but didn't know that you were one of us until you gave the sign. And right here I must give you some solid advice, and I mean to talk to you like a father. We will stand by you; but none of us are bound to stand by a man who won't stand by himself. So, if you expect to stay with the Cautious Crooks, and take their chances, you have got to keep a level head and be careful not to slop over. You may have been a big man down in Cheyenne; but here you will have to take your place in the ranks, and submit to our rules and regulations. Just now we are mighty particular about walking straight and keeping out of all sorts of scrapes that don't pay,

because the Vigilantes are getting to be too strong and too sharp for us to fight."

"I have been looking into that business," remarked the man from below. "Just before I met you I saw one of those Vigilantes, and had a talk with him."

"Who was that?"

"Judge Waller. He is one of their head men, if not the boss of the gang."

"How do you know that?"

"I knew it by the way he talked, and he knew all about me."

"Yes, they seem to know everything, curse them! and that's why we have to be so quiet and careful. I hope you didn't give anything away. But you were sober, and I suppose it is all right."

"I think I managed to pull the wool over his eyes."

After riding a couple of hours or so, Symmes halted in a ravine, where he dismounted and hitched his horse, bidding his companion do the same.

"What's this for?" demanded Cheyenne Charley. "We don't seem to have got anywhere."

"I must stop here and wait for a man."

"Who is he?"

"One of our men, Sam Bunker by name. He will soon be along."

After awhile Sam Bunker came riding into the ravine, and joined the two men who had preceded him.

He was duly made acquainted with the new recruit, who was warmly eulogized by Spence Symmes.

"I've heard tell of Cheyenne Charley," he replied, "and am proud to meet him. That's good openin's hyer fur a man o' his style, an' I reckon, Cap, he'll slide into 'em easy enough."

"What's the news at the Fork?" inquired Symmes.

"Jest nothin' at all. They's mighty quiet thar, sence Bill Seddons was lifted to glory, an' they do talk o' gittin' a gospel sharp to settle among 'em. The boys air all as quiet an' peaceable as turtle doves."

"Glad to hear it. We are on the quiet lay now. When we do strike we will make a noise, and the time will soon come. Is your ranch near here, Sam?"

"Well, Cap, if you call a few rods of rock and a shanty a ranch, my ranch ain't fur from hyer."

"Let us go up there. Perhaps you will give our friend here a shelter until we get ready to go to work."

"All right, Cap; but we'll have to leave the hosses down hyer. I'll show you whar."

Sam Bunker led the way to the head of the ravine, and through a narrow gap into a deep basin which was well carpeted with rich grass, a little brook running through it from an unfailing spring.

He put up a pole at the gap, and the horses were turned loose to graze.

"This is wot I call the Well Hole," said he. "It's jest a natural corral, and the grass is sweet an' tender, bet yer life. Foller me, gen'lemen."

He led the way up a precipitous ascent to a rocky summit, where a small cabin was stuck against the side of a high rock.

The cabin was rudely built of logs and poles, and was roofed with shingles of split oak. Heavy stones were piled against the logs, probably to prevent the tenement from being blown away by a high wind.

"This is the ranch, gen'lemen," said Sam Bunker; but immediately his countenance fell, his face grew red, and he began to pour forth a stream of oaths that might well have made the air turn blue.

There was a good cause for his profanity, which was indulged in mainly to cover a feeling of intense terror.

Tacked to the rude door of the cabin was a piece of white cardboard, on which was figured in black the likeness of a skull and a pair of crossbones, underneath which were the figures 3-7-77.

This was the usual symbol of the Vigilantes, by which notice was given to the occupant of the cabin that he must clear out and be seen no more in that region.

Between rage and fear the man was almost out of his wits, and his comrades waited patiently until lack of breath, rather than lack of language, caused him to subside.

"I reckon this won't be a safe place for you any longer, Sam," remarked Symmes. "Do you expect to clear out?"

"I will leave this ranch, as you call it; but I won't leave these hills, sure as my name is Sam

Bunker. I ain't afeard o' the Vigilantys, but I do despise tha'r sneakin' ways. The cussed skunks must ha' stuck that thing up last night when I was away. Why couldn't they come in the daytime, an' when the man o' the house was to hum?"

"They will be likely to do that soon enough, Sam—that is, if you should stay around here. You had better come over to my den."

"I'll do it, Cap; but I must fust see w'ot's become o' Ginger, and look arter my traps hyer."

"Take care of yourself, then. Charley and I will go on, and I will expect to see you considerably inside of twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER VI.

SAM BUNKER SLIDES OUT.

SPENCE SYMMES and Cheyenne Charley walked away toward the Well Hole to get their horses, and Sam Bunker stood in front of his cabin, gazing mournfully at the ominous notification that had been left by the Vigilantes.

He did not seem to think of pulling it down as it stared him blankly in the face.

Probably the terror with which it had inspired him restrained him from touching it.

"I wonder if Ginger was here when they put that thing up," he said. "If she was, I reckon she was too drunk to know anythin' about it. I must look the old gal up."

He was a picture of dejection as he pushed the shaky door open and entered the cabin.

The interior was nearly bare of furniture, and there was nothing in it that was suggestive of comfort.

Yet Sam Bunker cast his mournful glance about that dingy apartment as if he felt that it was his home, such as it was, and a home that he was loth to leave.

On the floor, if it could be called a floor, something in the shape of a woman lay on a blanket, motionless, but not dead, as was evident from her hard breathing.

This was an Indian woman, whom Sam Bunker had "taken up with" several years previously, and whose name of many syllables he had changed to the easier appellation of Ginger.

Ginger was neither young nor in the least degree good looking; but she had been a faithful slave to Sam, and well she might be, as he had supplied her with the one solace of her life—whisky.

She had doubtless been largely supplied with that solace of late, as she lay there in a stupor, and the fumes of liquor arose from where she slept.

Sam Bunker spoke to her and stirred her with his foot, but got no response other than inarticulate grunts.

"R ckon it's best so," he muttered. "She couldn't ha' knowed nothin' about the house gittin' vigilantified, an' mebbe ef she should wake up she might take on because I'm goin'. Poor old gal!"

So there was something besides the cabin that touched a chord in the breast of the rough and lawless man, and he was even sorry to leave that ugly and drunken squaw.

He made a bundle of clothes and blankets and a smaller bundle of ammunition.

The larger bundle he took in his hand.

"I'll leave the rifle an' things fur another load," said he. "That hill is powerful hard to git down."

He closed the door of the cabin when he went out, and picked his way down the steep descent to the bottom of the Well Hole, where he stopped to take breath.

Symmes and his comrade had taken their horses and gone, but the Well Hole was not vacant.

Sam Bunker's horse was grazing as usual, and there was also a young man there whom Sam recognized at once.

The cardigan jacket and the close cap with a tassel, if nothing else, would have told him that the young man was Clip Saunders.

And so it was.

Clip had tracked the other two from Orodia, and was confused by the hoof-prints and other "sign" that he found in the basin.

He had not perceived the arrival of Sam Bunker, who hastened to place himself in the gap, the only avenue by which the lad could expect to escape.

Clip looked up and caught sight of him just as he had taken this position of vantage.

"Now I've got you, you rotten young hound!" shouted Bunker. "Swing me up ef I don't cut your or'nary hide into shoe-strings!"

Clip looked at his antagonist, perceived that

there was no rifle in his possession, and faced him boldly.

That was quite the proper thing for him to do, as he had no chance to escape.

"Have you quit your castle up yonder, Sam?" he tauntingly asked. "I hear that you have made up your mind that it is a safe place to get away from."

"I ain't none o' your look-out-what-I-get-away-from. It's sart'in that you cain't git away from me, an' that's all I care about jest now."

"Big blow and small show," retorted Clip.

"You'll see what sort of a show it is. I'm goin' to belt the very breath outer you right now."

"Well, you won't have to hunt me up. I will come to you, and you had better get out of my way, or the show may be different from what you are counting on."

As the lad stepped forward he drew from its sheath his long and heavy knife.

"W'ot do you calkilate to do with that pork-slicer?" demanded Bunker. "Why, you cussed fool, I kin fill you full o' lead afore you git nigh me."

"Try it!" bravely ordered Clip.

Sam Bunker drew his revolver, and cocked it.

"You bet I will," he replied. "I swore that I'd be the death o' you, an' now I'll be as good as my word."

"Drop that pistol!" ordered Clip. "It will be as much as your life is worth to raise it."

Bunker did raise it; but at the instant Clip's knife went flying through the air like a flash of lightning, and its sharp blade sunk deep into his breast.

This style of attack was not only entirely unexpected, but was fatally effective.

The stricken man's shot was fired harmlessly into the air.

He waved his arms wildly, staggered, and fell backward to the ground.

The blade had pierced his heart.

"I couldn't help it," muttered Clip as he approached the body of his victim. "It was my life or his."

He drew out his knife, washed it in the little stream, shuddered as he returned it to its sheath, and left the Well Hole without looking back.

Sam Bunker lay there, cold and stark and alone, until late in the afternoon, when the Indian woman in his cabin shook off her stupor and arose from her hard couch.

She looked about in a blear-eyed manner, and noticed signs of the recent presence of her protector and purveyor, perceiving that certain familiar articles were missing.

Had he intended to leave her, as he had often threatened to do?

If so, he had not fully accomplished his purpose, as his rifle and his package of ammunition were still there.

Her red eyes filled with maudlin tears as this possibility pressed upon her.

"Him gone!" she feebly muttered.

If he had gone, he must of necessity have taken his horse, and she could find out whether the horse was missing.

So she left the cabin, and clambered down the steep descent into the Well Hole.

It was a difficult and dangerous task for Ginger in her condition, and more than once she came near falling down to her death, but finally reached the bottom of the basin in safety.

There she saw the body of Sam Bunker lying prone on the grass in a pool of his blood, and the wound in the breast showed her how he had lost his life.

She tottered to the corpse, and threw herself upon it, moaning and sobbing.

Even for Sam Bunker there was one to mourn.

At last she dried her eyes with her dirty blanket gown, and sat up on the grass.

"How git w'isky now?" she muttered, and that seemed to be the extent of the sentiment.

Clip Saunders went from the Well Hole direct to Orodia and to Judge Waller's office.

"The Vigilantes won't have to go after Sam Bunker, judge," he said.

"Why not? Has he cleared out already?"

"He has left this country."

"You seem to get hold of everything, Clip. Do you know which way he went?"

The lad pointed upward, and then pointed downward.

"I don't know which of those ways he went," he answered.

"What! Is he dead?"

"Yes, sir. I killed him. I had to do it, or he would have killed me."

Clip then told the story of the trail he had followed the morning, and of his encounter with Sam Bunker in the Well Hole.

"I am sorry for you, Clip," said the judge. "I know it went hard with you to take the man's life. But somebody would have had to kill him, and he is well out of the way. So Cheyenne Charley has taken up with Spence Symmes, and they are as thick as thieves, which is quite natural and just what I expected. As I told you, Clip, there is going to be trouble."

Clip Saunders did not return to Mat Warner's ranch until the next day.

He found the ranchman down in the bottom-land plowing his corn, and told him of the death of Sam Bunker.

"That knife of yours is a weapon," said Mat. "There is not the least grain of doubt of that."

"It has been stained with blood again," said Clip, "and this time it was human blood. But I would not for the world have them know it."

He pointed toward the house.

"All right, my boy. They shall not hear a word of it from me."

CHAPTER VII.

SPENCE SYMMES'S BIG STRIKE.

GANGS of men were working on the railroad in the vicinity of Orodia, busy at excavating and blasting and filling in and grading; but the road lacked a good deal of being finished to that point, and the nearest station was fully fifty miles away.

It is true that construction trains had been run beyond the station; but there was a big gap between the end of the track and Orodia, and a wash-out had made it bigger.

Therefore when the end of the month arrived, and the men in the vicinity of Orodia were to be paid off, it was necessary to bring the money in a wagon over the rough road that formed the only communication with the station.

This task was confided to Harry Venn, together with the duty of paying off the hands.

He had proved himself to be a cautious and reliable man, as well as skillful and courageous, and the paymaster preferred to trust him in that region, rather than to trust himself.

So Harry Venn went to the station, where he exhibited his pay-roll, and the money to meet the liabilities was delivered to him and receipted for.

It was packed in a box that was placed in a stout wagon drawn by two horses. Harry was to occupy the front seat with the driver, with two men on a rear seat, and two other guards who were to accompany the vehicle on horse-back.

The paymaster bid them adieu with good wishes, but with a rather dubious look on his face.

"I wish you the best of luck, Harry," he said; "but you must be very careful and keep a sharp lookout. I hear that the robbers are rising up along that road, in spite of the Vigilantes. I don't pretend to give you any advice, as I am sure that you know what to do better than I can tell you."

"I know the bad places on the road pretty well," replied the young man, "and I will be careful. If you have given me good men there will be a sharp fight before anybody gets this cash away from us."

The wagon and its escort started at as early an hour as possible in the morning; but the road was shockingly bad, and dusk found them still at a considerable distance from Orodia.

The driver proposed to camp for the night and finish the journey in the morning; but this proposition was far from meeting Harry Venn's views, and he put a decided negative upon it.

"There is but one more bad place," he said, "and we can easily pass it before night. Then we will have a clear and open road the rest of the way, where the darkness need not bother us, and we will be quite as safe when we are traveling as if we were in camp."

As Harry was the leader of the party, his opinion amounted to an order, and they proceeded on their weary way.

The bad place of which he spoke was a little distance from the foot of the valley in which Mat Warner's ranch was located.

At that point the road ran through a narrow and deep ravine, from which there was no opening at the sides, except the little gap that led into Warner's valley.

The sides of this ravine were steep and rocky, loaded with tall trees whose heavy shade made the pass quite gloomy even in the daytime.

When the wagon got down there the darkness proved to be considerably denser than Harry Venn had expected to find it, and he was nat-

urally anxious to get through the pass as speedily as possible.

He directed the driver to whip up the horses, and an effort was made to urge them forward; but it was unavailing, the road being so uneven and the boulders so plentiful that there was no chance for any but the slowest progress.

Just after they had passed the gap that led to the Warner valley the horses stopped suddenly, and could not be induced to take a step further.

"There is a pile of rock across the road," said one of the horsemen, who had gone forward to investigate.

"That looks like a trap," remarked Harry.

A trap it was, and it was sprung directly after the young man spoke.

"Throw up your hands, every one of you, or you are dead men!"

It was a clear and powerful voice, and startlingly near, that gave this order in commanding tones.

Harry Venn raised his rifle to his shoulder, and fired in the direction of the voice.

"We must fight for it, boys!" he said as he jumped out of the wagon.

At that instant a volley of rifle-shots was fired into the party from the right hand side of the road.

The two men on the back seat scrambled out as Harry Venn had done, and the driver tried to follow them; but a bullet through the brain ended his efforts forever.

One of the horses hitched to the wagon had been knocked down by that volley and the other was frantically struggling to get free.

Harry and the guards, availing themselves of such shelter as the wagon afforded, bravely stood up to their work, and did their best to make a good fight.

Their enemies were invisible; but they fired rapidly at the spots where the flashes of the rifles had been seen.

But they soon discovered, to their great dismay, that they had foes on both sides of the ravine, and an unexpected volley that was poured into their rear effectually ended the fight.

Harry Venn felt a sharp twinge in his right arm and nearly dropped his rifle.

Hardly had he turned to face his new adversaries, when a bullet struck his head and stretched him on the ground.

The two remaining men who had been in the wagon fell near him.

The horsemen, who had not yet been hit, were stricken with a panic when they saw the fate of their comrades, and spurred their horses to escape from the slaughter pen.

Shots were fired after them; but one got off unharmed, while the other rode away severely wounded.

The robbers came out from their concealment and gathered about the wagon and the bodies of their victims.

It could then be seen that they outnumbered the defeated escort fully two to one. All were masked, and all were armed with weapons of the best quality.

"This has been a bloody business, Spence," said one of them.

"A regular slaughter. Charley. But what could we do? If the fools had thrown up their hands and surrendered, they might be living yet. It is better that they should all die, than that one of us should go under. We made a sure thing of it, anyhow. Is anybody hurt, Joe?"

"Red-headed Mike has a got hole in his leg," answered another; "but that is all, except a few scratches."

"Bring up the horses, two of you, and put Mike on one of them. The rest of us will pile onto the plunder."

The horses, which had been concealed in the gap, were brought forward, and Spence Symmes and those who were with him broke open the box in the wagon, and hastened to load themselves with its contents of gold and silver and notes.

They had not finished this pleasing task when it was interrupted by a startling cry.

"Come on boys! Here they are!" was shouted by a shrill voice a little way down the road.

"Hurry up the rear there!" yelled a heavy bass voice:

"By column of twos, charge!" was ordered in louder and yet more commanding tones.

A sudden panic seized the robbers.

They did not stop to inquire whether the whole United States army was upon them, or to consider that a powerful foe would have been likely to pounce upon them with as little noise as possible; but ran to their horses,

mounted, and galloped away up the road as if their lives depended on their speed.

Hardly had the echoes of their horses' hoofs died away in the distance when a single individual came walking slowly and cautiously up the ravine, looking about to see if any of the raiders had failed to follow their comrades.

It was Clip Saunders.

His had been the three voices, of such widely different tones and qualities, that had struck terror to the souls of Spence Symmes and his scoundrels, driving them away in a senseless panic.

He walked to the wagon and looked in; saw the box and felt within it.

There was considerable money left.

"Scared them off, for a fact!" he exclaimed.

"And they didn't finish the job. That is better than nothing. Wonder, now, if all these folks are dead."

The driver in the wagon was, as he soon discovered, and a brief inspection satisfied him that two other men were also dead.

He heard a faint moan when he came where Harry Venn was lying.

"Hello! here is one who is not quite dead," said Clip. "It is Harry Venn, by Jove! If there is any life in him I must hold it there if I can."

Harry moaned again, and moved feebly.

Clip had a small flask of liquor, and he forced a little of it into the mouth of the prostrate man.

This revived him, and he was able to sit up with Clip's assistance.

"I am glad to see that you are not dead," said the lad. "Where are you hurt?"

"I hardly know," faintly answered Harry.

"Who is this? Clip Saunders? I don't believe I am dead, my boy: but my right arm is broken, and my head feels as if it had been all knocked to pieces."

Clip quickly but carefully cut away the sleeve of his coat, and bound up the wound with a handkerchief.

"I must try to hide you until I can get help," said he. "It is just possible that those murderers may come back."

He assisted Harry, partly carrying him, inside of the gap, and concealed him under some bushes.

Then he returned to the wagon, brought away the box, and hid it behind a rock.

Again he went back to the wagon, cut loose the uninjured horse, mounted him, and rode through the gap.

"I am going to get help for you, Harry," he said, and galloped away toward Mat Warner's ranch.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE FIRE.

WHEN Clip gave the alarm at Warner's the ranchman turned out with his hands, hitched up a team, and hurried off to the gap, leaving Mrs. Warner and Helen to prepare for the reception of the wounded man.

"You must take the best care of him you can," said Clip, "for Nelly's sake, if not for his own."

"Why, for Nelly's sake?" queried Mat Warner, in a tone of surprise.

Clip made no answer; but, when they got Harry Venn up to the house, and the ranchman observed how Helen "went on" over his wounds and his weakness, he understood well enough what the lad had meant.

"We now know why she was so set against that man who was here a while ago," he said to his wife. "But Venn is a fine young fellow, and I have no objection."

Clip Saunders set off for Orodia at an early hour in the morning, and when he got there he found the settlement in a state of great excitement.

The horsemen who escaped from Spence Symmes's slaughter-pen had reported the robbery and murder, and not only Orodia but the entire region had been aroused.

Messengers had been sent as far as Virginia City, and there was such a gathering of the clans for immediate vengeance as had not been seen in a long time.

The members of the Vigilance Committee were undoubtedly on hand, though nobody pretended to point them out.

There were no masks among them, nor was there any attempt at disguise or uniform; but everybody knew that they were there, mingling with the other citizens, and that the business of pursuing the outlaws would be under their direction.

Mounted and armed men were coming in singly and in squads when Clip arrived, and

they had rendezvoused in front of Judge Waller's office, and that gentleman was making a speech to them.

He said that the time had come when the question had to be decided whether the law and order party or the outlaws should rule the roost in that region. The villains had shown their hand, and evidently intended to play their game for all it was worth. They had just committed a most infernal outrage, combining murder with robbery, for which they ought to be hunted down and strung up, every one of them. He was sure that he at least knew who were the leaders of the gang that had attacked Harry Venn's party, and he believed that he knew where to find them. The gang must be exterminated, or no man's property or life would be safe in Montana. He hoped that his young friend Clip Saunders, whom he was glad to see there, had brought some information that would be acceptable to the citizens present.

Clip had some important and interesting information, and he was compelled to mount the drygoods box on which Judge Waller had stood, so that all might hear it.

He told how he had come upon the robbers when they were possessing themselves of the plunder, and had frightened them away. He rejoiced his hearers by informing them that Harry Venn was alive and expected to recover, and that part of the money was safe.

"If you want to know who the robbers were," he said in conclusion, "look at this pistol. I picked it up near the wagon, directly after they had gone away in a hurry, and I am sure that I have seen it in the possession of Spence Symmes. Perhaps more than one of you will recognize it."

The pistol, which was of a peculiar style, was passed around, and was identified by several as the property of Spence Symmes, who had been fond of showing it.

The party of pursuit was at once organized so that it should be capable of its work, and not too cumbersome.

Twenty-five brave and skillful men were selected and officered, and Clip Saunders was persuaded to mount a horse in order that he might accompany them.

They set out on the road by which Harry Venn and his escort were to have arrived, and a number of other men followed them with a team as far as the Warner gap, to bring in the bodies of the slain guards.

From that slaughter-pen the expedition followed the road a few miles further, and then turned off into a trail that led toward the east.

The most experienced trailers in the party declared that this was the route which the robbers had taken the night before, and it was followed until it was impossible to pursue it any further on horseback.

It was then a mystery what the fugitives had done with their horses, as they were not found there, and a careful search failed to reveal their whereabouts.

But the pursuers were not after horses, but after men.

Leaving their own in charge of a guard, they pushed forward, and began the difficult climb of a steep and rocky ascent, choosing the easiest route, rather than attempting to follow a trail that could not be found.

Thus they went upward and onward until they came to a log-house on the summit of the hill—or perhaps it might better be described as occupying a ledge on the mountain-side.

Orders were quietly given, and the party surrounded the building as well as they could, keeping at a distance, but covering all points that were believed to be accessible.

Then, at a noiseless signal, they began to close in, approaching the object of attack slowly and cautiously from all sides.

But quietly as their operations were conducted, the occupants of the log house were watchful and quick to take the alarm.

Hardly had the leaders of the assailing party shown themselves when two men bolted out of the building.

One of them was recognized as Spence Symmes, and Judge Waller was sure that the other was Cheyenne Charley.

Several shots were hastily fired at them; but they ran at the top of their speed to the edge of a cliff, where they disappeared.

Part of the pursuers followed them, while others hurried into the house, only to find it vacant.

The cliff where the fugitives disappeared had been supposed to be entirely inaccessible, and on that account had not been guarded.

A speedy investigation showed that there

was a rope reaching from the top to the foot of the cliff, down which the robbers had slid.

Once at the bottom they were among rocks and trees that protected them from bullets.

"After them, boys!" shouted Judge Waller. "We can run them down soon."

A few of the pursuers slid down the rope, and the others followed back the route by which they had ascended, and the chase began.

But it was not so easy to run them down as Judge Waller might have supposed.

In the first place, the trail had to be found, and it was easy to lose when it had once been picked up.

In the second place, the fugitives chose the roughest and most difficult ground—if the rocks and ravines of those tangled hills could be called ground—and, as they knew all the ins and outs of the region, they had quite an advantage over the men who were toiling after them.

As Judge Waller stopped on the crest of a ridge to take breath, the air was murky and full of a pungent odor, and dark volumes of smoke could be seen rolling up in the direction at which they were aiming.

"The woods are on fire!" said Captain Tams, who had halted there with him.

"Yes, they have been burning over yonder for two or three days, and the fire is coming this way right fast. Come on Tams. This is a hard chase."

It was indeed a hard chase, more toilsome than exciting, and the strangest part of it was that it led the pursuers directly toward the region that was devastated by the forest fire.

When it came to running, Clip Saunders easily surpassed the best, getting over the ground very rapidly, and never seeming to tire.

Consequently he alone kept the fugitives in sight, and he was relied on by the others to act as their pilot.

This close pursuit by one person was naturally annoying in the extreme to Symmes and his companion; and the former turned more than once to get a shot at the lad who was so persistently dogging them; but Clip was not following them for the purpose of being shot, and he prudently kept out of range.

As he reached the summit of a steep slope he saw the robbers scudding over a long stretch of level and heavily-timbered ground, and at the same time he found himself face to face with the forest fire.

A stiff breeze from the west swept the flames forward, and they came on rapidly, roaring and hissing and crackling, licking up the rank undergrowth, and wrapping their fiery tongues around the tall trees, one of which every now and then fell with a crash, sending up clouds of smoke and sparks.

Yet the two fugitives pressed steadily on toward the heart of the fire, as if they were unaware of its presence.

"Come on!" shouted Clip to the men, who were a little way behind him. "We will catch them between us and the fire."

He went on, keeping the two men in view, and those who came toiling up the slope put new vigor into the pursuit when they also caught sight of the fugitives.

Symmes and his comrade could be seen keeping their course until they must have been near enough to the fire for the flames to scorch them.

Then they were lost to sight in the heavy undergrowth.

In a few minutes the deluge of fire had swept over the spot where they were last seen.

Their pursuers, startled and amazed, were compelled to fly before the advancing flames.

"It looks like suicide," said Judge Waller. "But who would have thought of such a suicide as that? Of course, they have been burned to a crisp before this."

"I am not so sure of that," responded Clip Saunders.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW ORODIA WAS RAIDED.

THE hunters of men returned to their homes. They had been vanquished by the forest fire, and compelled to postpone the search, but had no idea of abandoning it.

Clip Saunders, who had his own opinion of the fate of Spence Symmes and his comrade, returned to the spot where they had disappeared as soon as the fire had passed over it.

He got there before the ground was fairly cool, and turned up hot embers among the ashes as he walked over the burned district.

It was difficult to locate the exact point where he had last seen the two fugitives, as the ap-

pearance of the region had been so greatly changed by the forest fire; but he found no charred bodies and no bones, and was certain that the men had not died there.

They could not have gone on, as it would have been impossible for them to go through the burning fire, or even to pass the edge of the fire.

What, then, had become of them?

This was the mystery that the lad was determined to solve.

A bare and high rock rose among the blackened stumps and trees, and it occurred to him that the robbers might have found shelter on its leeward side, or possibly under it.

Clip hastened to the rock, and the mystery was no longer a mystery.

At its base was a hole, abundantly large to allow a man to pass in by stooping, and evidently leading downward.

He made a torch and lighted it, and entered the hole without hesitation.

The passage grew larger as he went inward, and at the bottom was a small subterranean stream.

Of course the stream must have an outlet somewhere, and the lad went forward boldly, believing that although the robbers had taken refuge in that hole, they had not remained there.

This belief proved to be correct. He found nobody in the passage, but found the end of it without difficulty.

It debouched at the side of a ravine, and from its mouth he easily scrambled down to the valley below.

The fugitives had doubtless done so, and had laughed in their sleeves at their discomfited pursuers.

Clip went to Orodia and told his story, which had the effect of starting a new and more extensive search for the outlaws.

It was not only certain that Symmes and his comrade had escaped alive, but that the secret and general rendezvous of the band had not been discovered.

Those two, as Judge Waller said, had probably been found by accident at the lone house on the night, having stopped there for some unknown purpose while they were on their way to or from their usual hiding-place.

Therefore, as has been said, a new and more extensive hunt was organized.

It was not one party alone that was sent out this time, but several parties, all strong and well led.

Their orders were to search the hills thoroughly, to capture and bring in every man who was known to be a member of Spence Symmes's gang, and to arrest all suspicious persons whom they might happen to meet.

In the temper that the people then manifested it was easy to find elements of suspicion, and suspicious persons were liable to be treated to already rope and a short shrift.

The several parties set out from Orodia, each having its district and plan of operations laid out, and performed their task to the best of their ability; but the general result was unsatisfactory; except that a number of undesirable characters who had infested that region took the alarm and made themselves scarce.

The robbers who were hunted were entirely invisible, and no trace of their hiding-place was discovered.

But the first party that returned to Orodia found undeniable traces of them in that settlement.

Their surprise and consternation were extreme, and nobody doubted that the outlaws must have had full and accurate information of their plans and movements, or they would not have been able to elude them so successfully and strike such a savage and effective blow in their rear.

The fact that the settlement was nearly emptied of its able-bodied citizens had been taken advantage of for a raid upon Orodia.

It was noon—a hot and slumberous noon—and the man-hunting parties had been several hours away, when Spence Symmes and his merry men, to the number of a dozen or more, dashed into Orodia.

The settlement seemed to be almost deserted, and even the business of drinking was suspended.

The few chronic loafers who were out of doors smoked their pipes and whittled their sticks on the shady sides of the two saloons.

When the clattering of hoofs was heard it was at first supposed that one of the parties that left in the morning had returned with a prisoner or with important news.

This idea was soon dissipated by repeated

rifle and pistol-shots, accompanied by hideous yells and whoops, the meaning of which most Orodians knew too well.

The town was taken, and its lives and property were at the mercy of a pack of miscreants.

Those who had run out to see what was the matter ran back yet more quickly, and hastily sought hiding-places.

If a head was in sight anywhere out of doors, it was saluted with a shot that caused it to disappear with the greatest possible speed.

Most of the raiders, including the leaders, hurried on to Judge Waller's office, where they dismounted and forced open the door.

The others guarded the street, firing a shot now and then by way of caution.

Judge Waller was the banker of the settlement, although he did not keep a regular banking-house, and the funds that were supposed to be in his possession made his office the objective point of the attack.

But his money and valuable papers were securely locked in a large fire and burglar-proof safe, which he had brought to Orodia at a heavy expense, and which defied the utmost efforts of the outlaws.

They had no burglars' tools, luxuries of civilization which had not yet penetrated that mountainous region, and were soon convinced of their inability to get inside of that obstinate mass of iron and steel.

Maddened by their failure, they fired the building, and set out to wreak their rage on the remainder of the town.

Orodia contained, in addition to the two saloons, two general stores, whose proprietors had hastily closed their doors and taken to the woods.

The doors were no obstacle to the marauders, who burst them open, and helped themselves to the contents of the cash drawers and whatever else they wanted, besides spreading destruction among fragile articles at their own sweet will.

The post-office and the saloons shared the same fate, and there were many to lament the loss of their property when the triumphant raiders finally galloped away.

There was but one life taken during the foray—that of Susan Nettle, the proprietress of the Stunner, who was the only person in Orodia who was "man enough" to resist the raiders.

She closed her establishment, but did not run away.

When they burst open the door she faced them with a leveled revolver.

It happened that the first man to get in was Cheyenne Charley, and her shot missed him.

Before she could fire again the scoundrel fired and shot her through the heart.

All the raiders were masked; but people who were bold enough to watch them from hiding-places recognized more than one of them by his voice or some peculiarity of his person.

A more amazed and disgusted set of people than the expeditionaries when they returned to the settlement it would be hard to find in this broad land.

Their disgust was so extensive that it scarcely left room for anger.

It was unanimously agreed that the outlaws had been too smart for them, and that the greatest discretion and vigor would be required to effect the extermination of their enemies.

Judge Waller congratulated himself on the possession of his stout safe, and inquired for Clip Saunders.

CHAPTER X.

CRUEL AND DEADLY BLOWS.

HARRY VENN'S injuries were severe, but he was likely to recover.

His arm had been badly shattered, and it was so long before a physician could be brought from a distance to attend to it, that it suffered for lack of surgical care.

The bullet that struck his head had neither entered the skull nor fractured it, but it had done its share of harm.

Between the two wounds it is no wonder that fever set in and brought him low.

He was of course well nursed by Mrs. Warner, and Helen, who made no concealment of her feeling for him, was unremitting in her attentions.

While he lay there helpless the forest fires encroached upon the valley, and Mat Warner was obliged to bestir himself to save his crops from destruction. The country was parched by the lack of rain, there was difficulty in procuring water for the cattle, and the air was loaded with smoke, through which the sun shone dimly.

The house was situated under the hill, on the

slope at the southern side of the valley, and at the edge of a grove of tall trees.

The fire crept around on that side, and came booming down the hill at such a rapid rate that Mat Warner was compelled to quit everything else and devote his entire attention to saving his house and his other buildings.

With his farm hands and Clip Saunders he worked early and late, cutting down the trees and carrying away the timber, striving to clear such a belt as should relieve him from the fear of danger, except such as might come from an unusually high wind.

It was not yet noon, and the men were all at work in the timber, and Mrs. Warner was in the kitchen.

Helen was in Harry Venn's room on the same floor—in fact, there was but one floor—at a little distance from the kitchen.

Harry's condition had considerably improved that morning, and Helen was quite cheerful.

Steps were heard, seemingly of one or two men, who had entered the house at the front door.

Mrs. Warner naturally supposed that one or more of the men had come in on some errand, though she wondered why they had chosen the front way.

Her daughter had the same impression.

But Helen was quickly undeceived when two men entered the room, and she at once recognized the leading man as Spence Symmes.

The man behind him, though unknown to either Harry Venn or the girl, was Cheyenne Charley, whom Symmes had adopted as his closest friend and comrade.

Helen trembled when she met the outlaw's triumphant gaze, but faced him boldly.

"Here I am, you see," said Symmes. "I told you that I would come when I chose and in a way that you wouldn't like."

"Why have you come here?" she demanded.

"To get you, and I mean to take you, too."

He suited the action to the word, and sprang forward and seized her.

Poor Harry Venn was helpless, being neither able to move nor even to speak in a loud tone, and could only look on in anguish.

Helen could scream, and she did scream at the top of her voice.

Her mother heard her and hastened to her assistance.

She was not unarmed, but picked up a pistol that lay on a shelf, cocking it as she ran.

"Somebody's coming—look out, Charley!" said Spence Symmes, who heard the footsteps as he was endeavoring to stifle the girl's cries.

Cheyenne Charley was always ready with his revolver, and this time he was hasty.

As Mrs. Warner came in sight he leveled his pistol and fired at her.

The bullet struck her in the forehead, and she fell lifeless on the floor of the hall.

Already the cowardly brute had the lives of two women to account for.

"What did you do that for, you infernal fool?" demanded Symmes, who was provoked to anger by what appeared to be an unnecessary tragedy.

"Do you suppose I am going to stand here and be shot down?" replied his comrade.

Helen had fainted at the fearful sight, and the outlaw had his opportunity.

He raised her in his strong arms, and bore her out of the house.

There he mounted, and the man from Cheyenne lifted her to the saddle-bow before him.

Then they both rode rapidly away down the valley.

Clip Saunders, who was working with the others in the timber, heard the shot that killed Mrs. Warner, and spoke of it.

"It sounded like a pistol-shot at the house," he said.

It had been so faint that he could not be sure of what it really was, and it had not been even noticed by the others.

"That can't be," said Mat Warner. "It must have been a burning tree falling on the hill that you heard."

But Clip was doubtful and worried, and said that he would go to the house and see if anything was the matter there.

So he hastened away, and in the hall near the front door he encountered the lifeless body of Mrs. Warner.

The fatal bullet-hole in her forehead, from which the blood was oozing, told him how she had been slain, and he was wild to find her assassin.

Harry Venn's faint voice called to him through the open door of his room.

Clip hurried in there, and saw nothing of Helen.

"What does this mean, Harry?" he asked. "What has happened? Who has been here?"

"Spence Symmes and another man. They have carried off Nelly."

"And murdered her mother. God in Heaven! There can be no hell hot enough for such villains. Which way did they go?"

"Down the valley, I believe. It sounded like that when they rode off."

"Of course they went down the valley. I will be back in a moment, Harry."

Clip ran to the back door, where hung a long tin horn which was used to call the hands to dinner.

On this he blew a loud blast, and hurried back to the wounded man.

"I am going to follow them, Harry," he said. "Mr. Warner will be here directly, and you must tell him. It will be a terrible shock to him, and I wish I could break it to him; but I can't wait."

"What do you think you can do?" feebly asked Harry.

"I don't know; but you may be sure that I will do all I can. I hope that I can at least find out where they go to."

Clip ran out of the house, and went down the valley at a loping gait.

The blowing of the horn startled Mat Warner and the others who were at work in the timber.

It was not yet dinner-time, as they knew, and the horn was not sounded as Mrs. Warner was accustomed to sound it.

"There is something the matter," said the ranchman, as he turned pale. "I must go to the house."

He hurried off, and the others followed him.

The sight that met his eyes when he reached the house drove him frantic.

He had loved his wife as she deserved to be loved, and she and his daughter were all the world to him.

To find the faithful partner of his joys and sorrows during so many years dead in her own house, murdered by some unknown villain, was a greater strain than his strength could bear, and he fell at her side in a swoon.

While he was prostrate there one of the men went into Harry Venn's room, and learned from him the particulars of the terrible event, and this sad story was repeated to Matthew Warner as soon as he was able to bear it.

"But where is Clip?" he asked.

He was told that Clip, after blowing the horn, had hurried off to follow the men who had raided the house.

"What can the boy do, on foot, against such men? We must set out and chase them at once. That is—there is something to do here first."

He sent the men to get what they could pick up in the way of dinner, and with his own hands raised the body of his wife, and carefully laid it away, closing the doors and shutters of the room in which it was placed.

Soon horses were brought up, and Matthew Warner and two of his men armed themselves, and rode away, leaving the third in charge of the house and of Harry Venn.

They could not help feeling that they had a hopeless task before them, as the marauders had got such a long start, and it was difficult even to guess at the direction they had taken.

And so it proved. They were able to follow the trail through the gap, and to judge that at that point it turned toward the north; but they soon lost all trace of it among the many tracks of the beaten road.

Thus they wandered about, searching for what they could not find, until night compelled them to return to the ranch.

CHAPTER XI.

CLIP'S STRATEGY.

WITH Clip Saunders the chase of Spence Symmes and his comrade was a different affair.

He was by no means as incapable of that pursuit as Matthew Warner had for the moment imagined him to be.

He did not suppose that he would be able to follow the raiders on foot; but he had a pretty good idea of the point at which he would be likely to overtake them, if at all, and he knew how to take a short cut across the hills to reach that point.

It was a hard and tedious tramp, part of it being very difficult climbing; but Clip was by nature and training a runner and a climber, and was urged forward by a motive that made him more swift and tireless than ever.

He got over the hills and ravines at an astonishing rate, and reached the road at the trail that was struck by the first party of Vigilantes from Orodia.

This trail he followed until he came to the

foot of the steep ascent up which he had toiled with the others.

He saw nothing there of the people for whom he was looking, but found the fresh tracks of two horses leading to the left along the base of the hill.

These tracks he followed without delay, proceeding cautiously as he approached the cliff down which Spence Symmes and his partner had disappeared when they were so nearly caught by the Vigilantes.

It was well that he did so, as he was not yet in sight of the foot of the cliff when he heard voices.

Crawling forward carefully until he reached an advantageous position, he concealed himself under some bushes.

From his hiding-place he plainly saw Spence Symmes, Cheyenne Charley, their horses, and Helen Warner.

The girl was seated on the ground, the picture of despair, and was evidently bound both hand and foot.

The men, who appeared to have but lately arrived, had dismounted, and were debating as to the course they should pursue.

"Of course we are as safe as the stars in the sky," Symmes was saying. "There was nobody at that ranch who could begin to follow us, and soon we will be safe in the den, when the devil himself couldn't get at us."

"We had better go on then," suggested the other.

"We will, shortly. Stay here and watch the girl, Charley, while I go and hide the horses. I won't be away more than fifteen minutes."

Symmes took the bridles of the two horses, and led them northward through the timber along the base of the hill.

Clip had decided upon a plan of action, and was quick to carry it out.

It was possible that he might kill Cheyenne Charley where he stood, as he had killed Sam Bunker; but he hated to shed blood, and the attempt might fail, to say nothing of its probable effect upon Helen Warner.

He believed that he knew a trick worth two of that, and quietly circled around toward the direction that had been taken by Spence Symmes.

It was then late in the afternoon, and the shades of night were beginning to darken the valley.

As soon as Clip supposed that the outlaw was out of hearing he called to Cheyenne Charley, imitating Symmes's tones, and throwing his voice beyond the point from which he called.

"Hello, Charley?"

"Hello, yourself!" answered the man from Cheyenne.

"Come here, quick!"

"What the — do you want?"

"I want you. Come here right away."

"Shall I leave the girl?"

"Yes—she is all right. Come along the trail at the foot of the hill."

Naturally supposing that his comrade had somehow got into trouble, Cheyenne Charley hurried off, and was soon lost to view in the timber.

He had scarcely ceased to be visible when Clip ran to Helen Warner.

"Oh, Clip!" she joyfully exclaimed, "is it really you?"

By way of answer he cut her bonds with his sharp knife, and raised her to her feet.

"Can you run?" he asked.

"Yes, and I will be so glad to run!"

Clip took her by the hand, and led her away as fast as her feet would carry her, along the base of the mountain, toward the trail that led to the road.

The hour of dusk had arrived, and the songs of the birds had ceased, and night would soon be at hand.

Before they reached the trail the quick eyes of the lad caught sight of something that seemed to be exactly what he wanted to find—a place of refuge and concealment.

Where the face of the mountain was so steep as to be almost overhanging, a lone and peculiar rock stood out from the rest of the dark mass, at the height of some twenty feet from the ground.

It had the appearance of an old-fashioned pulpit, with a space of several feet between it and the main body of the mountain.

"Here is our chance, Nelly," said Clip, and he assisted her to climb toward the pulpit rock.

Neither of them could reach it by climbing, and Clip, seizing an edge, raised himself up.

Then he grasped both of the girl's hands, and lifted her to the ledge.

There they found ample room and a safe hid-

ing-place, as it was certain that they could not be seen from below, and quite unlikely that anybody would come up there to search for them.

"All we have to do now," said the lad, "is to crouch down and keep quiet."

They had hardly got themselves well settled down behind the pulpit rock, when they heard voices at the point from which Helen had made her escape.

Loud and angry as the tones were, Clip and his companion could not distinguish what was said, though they could easily guess that the two outlaws had discovered the absence of the girl, and were venting their wrath and amazement.

After a little while they both came running along the trail at the foot of the mountain, and halted directly under the pulpit rock.

"Come on, Spence!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charley, who was clearly not the one who had caused the halt. "We can catch her if we run."

"Don't be too sure of that," replied his comrade. "We had better think a little before rushing so fast. What the deuce made you lose sight of her?"

"You called me—or I thought you did. I would have been willing to swear that it was your voice."

"It wasn't, though; I never said a word. I was out of hearing of it all. I would give a heap to get hold of the devil who did call. Of course she had help, as she could never have cut herself loose."

"Of course she had help," responded the man from Cheyenne.

"And whoever was smart enough to do that trick would be smart enough to get her out of the way. And now it is getting to be as dark as a stack of black cats, and our chance of running across her is about one in a million."

"Well, then," said Cheyenne Charley, "as you think there is no use in running, suppose we make a light and look for the trail."

In a few minutes they had a fire of leaves and twigs, at which they kindled torches, and began to look for signs of the fugitives.

Clip Saunders drew his long knife from its sheath, to be prepared for the worst in case of discovery.

Helen did not even whisper, and could not be heard to draw her breath.

But the light was too uncertain, and the trail was too stony to enable the outlaws to distinguish the tracks they sought.

Spence Symmes dashed his torch upon the ground, and burst out in a torrent of wrathful profanity.

"It is your own fault," said Cheyenne Charley, when his comrade had thus relieved his mind. "If you had run on, as I wanted you to, we might have caught them."

"You talk like a fool," replied Symmes, and one angry word led to another, until they were on the edge of a fight.

But they saw the folly of that sort of thing, and cooled down.

"I don't know but you are more than half right," said Symmes. "And now I believe that our best plan will be to get the horses and ride down to the gap. Of course the girl will make for home, and we may overhaul her on the way."

Forewarned is forearmed, and Clip was glad to know the route in which danger lay, as he would thus be prepared to avoid it.

He waited until the mounted outlaws had passed the pulpit rock, when he got Helen down from that elevation, and followed them as far as the road, but no farther.

"Now, Nelly," said he, "we have got a tough journey before us. We must take a short cut across the hills—the same that I took when I caught up with you. It will be the hardest kind of work, but better than being in the hands of those infernal scoundrels."

"A million times better," she answered, "and I am ready to do and bear everything you want me to. I am crazy to get home to my poor father, though I am also to go to my dead mother."

It was indeed a hard task to get over that rough route in the darkness, and the journey was tedious as well as difficult.

Frequently they were obliged to halt to allow the wearied girl to rest, and day was breaking when they reached the valley and came in sight of Mat Warner's house.

After Clip had scouted around to make sure that their enemies were not in reach, they crossed the valley, and Helen Warner, exhausted by fatigue and anxiety, was restored to her home and the arms of her heart-broken father.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FATE OF A SPY.

THE murder of Matthew Warner's wife and the abduction of his daughter would have stirred up the Vigilantes if they had needed any stirring.

They had not been idle; but it was recognized as a fact that it would be useless to send out any more expeditions until the rendezvous of the outlaws could be located so that they might be successfully attacked.

Several of the best scouts in that region were set at work upon the task of discovering their hiding-place, and as careful a watch as was possible was kept upon all suspicious characters.

In the meantime, a question of considerable importance engaged the attention of the leaders of the law and order party.

They were unanimously of the opinion that immediate information of all the movements from Orodia must have been conveyed to the desperadoes, and of course there must be a traitor in the settlement.

It would have been impossible for Symmes and his gang to have so successfully evaded the expeditions that were sent against them, or to have so exactly timed their raid upon Orodia, unless their information had been early and accurate.

At a secret conference that was held in Judge Waller's new office this question was discussed, and the conclusions above stated were unanimously agreed to.

A further comparison of views elicited the opinion that there was one person in the settlement upon whom suspicion might fairly be fastened.

This person was Zach Stammel, a chronic loafer, who was never known to do a stroke of work, and who had not even such "visible means of support" as might be afforded by gambling.

Yet he was by no means destitute of money, and his time was mainly passed in loafing about the Bon Ton saloon, familiarly known as "The Graveyard."

The first expedition from Orodia, and the subsequent simultaneous expeditions, had necessarily been matters of general notoriety, as so many persons had been interested and engaged in them, and the fact was noted that previous to their starting Zach Stammel had been missed from his usual haunts, and had not been seen in the settlement for at least several hours.

As he was usually quite regular in his loafing habits, this point came up when suspicion had been awakened.

There were those who remembered that he had been asked what had become of him on the occasions referred to, and that he had replied that he had been off prospecting.

As he had no prospector's outfit, and gave no indications of having been engaged in that pursuit, this answer was regarded as merely evasive.

It was decided at the conference that Zach Stammel should thereafter be closely watched, and two discreet and careful men, known as Abe Shedder and Missouri Mose, were set to shadow him.

But this was not enough.

If Stammel was a traitor and a spy, it was necessary that he should have some news to carry to the enemy, in order that he might be entrapped and his offense brought home to him.

Captain Tams suggested the expediency of "putting up a job" on the spy and the outlaws together, and he elaborated quite an extensive plan for that purpose.

He proposed that it should be given out that a load of gold from the Orodia smelting works would pass over the road on a certain day, and that armed men should be concealed in the wagon, while others should form an ambush for the robbers at a point where an attack might be expected.

Thus, he said, they might kill two birds with one stone, trapping the spy when he carried the news, and trapping the road-agents when they sought to capture the treasure.

But this plan was regarded as too risky and uncertain, especially in view of the fact that the point of attack could not be fixed with reasonable confidence, and an idea of Judge Waller's was finally adopted.

It would be best, the judge said, to attend to one thing at a time, and the trapping of the spy, if there was a spy, should not be mixed up with anything that was calculated to interfere with that piece of business.

So it was publicly given out that the hiding-place of Spence Symmes and his gang had

been discovered, and that an expedition would be sent out the next day to capture them.

Preparations for that purpose were openly made, and the settlement was astir over the movement, which was believed in by all except the few who were in the secret.

Of course the news was heard by Zach Stammel as he loafed about the "Graveyard," and those who were watching him already noticed that a peculiarly eager look came into his usually dull and listless face.

Shortly afterward he disappeared, but not so stealthily and completely as to prevent him from being seen and followed.

Abe Shedder and Missouri Mose, who had been selected to shadow him, were experienced scouts and trailers—in fact, good mountain detectives, though that was not their profession—and well fitted for the task they had undertaken.

When the supposed spy started off into the hills they no longer had any doubt that he was a spy, and they followed him at a safe distance, and with the greatest possible caution, but as closely and relentlessly as Indians on the trail of an emigrant train.

It was a long and tedious tramp that he led them, pursuing no beaten track, but keeping a straight and certain course as steadily as if he knew where he was going, and had not the least fear of losing his way.

At times they nearly lost him among the intricacies of the hills, but perseveringly stuck to his trail, and at last "treed" him on a plateau far up a mountain side.

It was then near the middle of the afternoon, and the trailers had reason to hope that the man they were following might lead them to the hiding-place of the desperadoes.

This hope, however, was not justified by the events as they transpired.

Zach Stammel had evidently treed himself, as he showed no disposition to go any further.

He took a whistle from his pocket and blew a long, shrill, and reaching blast.

Then he sat down at the foot of a tree to rest and wait for a response.

Abe Shedder and Missouri Mose concealed themselves near by, and closely watched for developments.

The response came quickly. A similar whistle sounded from a distance; but the spy did not stir from his position.

It was evident that he expected to be met there by the men he sought, instead of going to meet them.

After a wait of nearly half an hour a man appeared on the plateau so suddenly and unexpectedly that the watchers could not guess where he had come from.

He was heavily armed, but not masked, and was at once recognized by the trailers as one of the men who were believed to belong to Spence Symmes's band.

The fact was certified by what followed.

Zach Stammel rose to meet the man, and a conversation ensued between the two, in which the news of Orodia was fully told.

All that was said did not reach the ears of the watchers; but they heard enough to amply convince them of the fact which they set out to establish.

"So they think they've got the bulge on us now," said the man from nowhere, with a loud laugh. "You may bet your good-for-nothin' life, Zachariah, that they're as bad fooled as if they'd been swapped out o' their boots. But your story is worth money, if it's true, and I reckon it is, as you've done the squar' thing by us so far. Here's your ducats, old soak-an'-swill, and mind that you don't let us miss a bit o' news we ort to git."

Zach Stammel eagerly held out his hand for the pieces of gold that were dropped into it, and speedily transferred them to his pocket.

As he turned to go away a rifle cracked from the cover of a rock, and its bullet struck the outlaw in the breast.

He staggered, and dropped upon his knees, but had partly raised his rifle when another shot was fired, and he fell over, a corpse.

The spy was so astonished and frightened by this unexpected attack that he was incapable of flight, and he made no attempt at resistance when the two trailers ran out from their places of concealment and seized him.

He was at once strongly bound, and was hurried away as soon as his captors had searched the pockets of the dead desperado and taken possession of his weapons.

Zach Stammel was so terrified by this unlooked-for termination of his adventure that he could hardly move, and it required the most vigorous talk and action on the part of his

captors to set him in motion down the mountain.

Dull as he was by nature, and soggy with liquor, he did not need to be told that the discovery of his treachery had not been accidental.

It was clear to the muddiest intellect that he had been suspected and followed from the settlement, that his capture was pre-arranged, and that there could be no question of his fate.

He knew that he was a doomed man.

He was compelled to retrace his steps as rapidly as possible, and he and his captors made pretty good time on their way back, reaching Orodia considerably after dark, but before any of the citizens had thought of going to bed.

The news of his capture and arrival speedily became common property, and a crowd that included nearly every person in the settlement congregated in front of Judge Waller's new office, whither he was taken.

There was of course no thought of resorting to any process of law to punish him, except the law of the majority—the law of Judge Lynch.

In deference to the wishes of the crowd, the prisoner was brought out on the street, and the lynch court was organized "in the open."

Twelve jurors were selected, and Judge Waller was chosen to preside, and the proceedings were brief and summary.

After Abe Shedder and Missouri Mose had given their clear and convincing testimony, Judge Waller made a short address, in which he properly described the crime of the spy, by which, as he said, a knife had been put to the throat of every man and woman in that region, and which had made possible the murders of Susan Nettle and Mrs. Warner.

Without any hesitation the jury pronounced a verdict of guilty and a sentence of death.

The prisoner had nothing to say for himself, seeming to be stupefied by the entire affair, and not until he was dragged to execution with the rope around his neck did he recover his senses sufficiently to beg for his life and for a drink of whisky.

His entreaties were unheeded, and soon the body of Zach Stammel was swinging from a tree at the edge of town, a warning to all who might be tempted to follow his example.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

THE scouts who had been carefully searching the hills, skillful and active men as they were, were slow to bring any information of value, and it was reserved for Clip Saunders to make the next important discovery.

One day when he was in Orodia he was surprised at seeing there no less interesting a person than the Indian woman known as Ginger, who had been made a sort of left handed widow by the sudden taking off of Sam Bunker.

He had happened to know something of the position she occupied in Bunker's cabin, and had naturally wondered what had become of her since the death of her patron.

When he saw her in Orodia she was well dressed—for her—and was actually sober—so sober that she went about with a stolid and inexpressive face, and appeared to be quite unable to understand the meaning of any questions that were addressed to her.

She had intelligence enough, however, to know what she wanted, to make her purchases with good judgment, to pay for them properly, and to make sure that she was not cheated in making change.

As she was supplied with money, it occurred to Clip that she must have found another protector.

From the fact that she was sober he concluded that her new master must be a man of sufficient force of character to scare her into leaving liquor alone when he did not wish her to drink.

He must, also, be a man who was unwilling to come to the settlement, or he would not have given her money and allowed her to make purchases in Orodia.

It was to be supposed, therefore, that he was a man somewhat of Sam Bunker's stripe, and probably one of Spence Symmes's gang.

These conclusions were confirmed by the nature of her purchases.

She bought whisky at the "Graveyard"—quite a quantity of it—but did not even smell at a flask, though she would doubtless gladly have drained at least one of them.

She made several other purchases of various little matters that could not possibly have been intended for her own use.

Having settled it in his mind where she belonged, and on what sort of an errand she had come there, Clip was strongly inclined to believe that whoever followed the Indian woman from Orodia would be led to the hiding-place of the outlaws.

Therefore he followed her.

He did not excite her suspicions by questioning her or dogging her heels, but noted the route she took when she left the settlement, and set out in that direction.

Soon he had the satisfaction of seeing her mount a horse that she had left tethered in the timber and ride away.

As she was not likely to have a horse of her own, this was another item of interest.

Though Clip Saunders did not claim to be a trailer like Abe Shedder or Missouri Mose, he considered himself fully able to keep track of a squaw and a horse, and had no doubt of his ability to go wherever the horse could go.

Somewhat to his surprise, the route that Ginger pursued after she had mounted was a public and easy one.

From the timber she struck into the road that led by Warner's Gap, where there could be no difficulty in following her.

She did not attempt to press her horse to speed, and all the lad had to do was to jog along and keep out of her sight.

In the course of time she turned from the road to the right, into a trail with which Clip had good cause to be acquainted, as it was the same trail which the first expedition from Orodia had taken, and the same which he had struck when he went to the rescue of Helen Warner.

She followed this trail to the foot of the mountain, where she turned northward.

"This is getting interesting," said the lad as he pursued her along the trail which he had previously trod under exciting circumstances.

She passed the cliff where Spence Symmes and Cheyenne Charley had descended by a rope, and where they had halted with Helen and lost her, and she went straight on toward the north.

Clip followed her as closely as he could without being seen, fearing that he might lose sight of her, or that she might suddenly disappear in some unaccountable manner.

But he soon learned that there was really nothing mysterious about the matter.

At a little distance from the foot of the cliff she came to a mountain brook, a swift little stream with a stony bottom, that ran toward the east.

Into this she rode, the water coming up to her horse's knees, and of course effectually extinguishing the trail.

Thus she went on down the stream, Clip keeping her well in view, until the brook passed through a narrow gap in a high bluff.

Ginger passed through the gap with the stream, and was lost to sight.

The lad hastened his steps, and waded through the gap after her.

Before him lay a scene that at once astonished and pleased him.

It was a little green valley, almost exactly similar to Sam Bunker's Well Hole, with high hills on every side but the south side, which was a precipitous mass of rock.

A number of horses were quietly grazing in this new Well Hole, and there, too, was the Indian woman, turning loose the horse she had ridden thither, and removing the bridle and pad.

It was certain that he had found the hiding-place of the robbers' horses; but where was the den of the robbers themselves?

There was nothing visible in the little valley that would guide him to it, and he could only hope that the unsuspecting Ginger would continue to lead him.

She took the few trappings of her horse in her hand, and walked toward the cliff at the south side.

No opening could be seen there, nor anything that could be called peculiar, except the trunk of a dead tree, some twenty feet in height, that stood close against the rock.

Ginger went direct to the dead tree, while Clip peered out from behind his cover, wondering what she was going to do.

She stood there a few minutes, and then a section of the tree moved outward, as if upon hinges, disclosing an opening in the rock.

Ginger passed in at the opening, and the section of the tree turned and closed behind her.

The mystery was solved.

There was the hiding-place of the outlaws, and very skillfully it was arranged.

The upper part of the dead tree was doubtless

firmly bolted to the rock, and the section below had been sawed out and arranged so that it would revolve, and when it was in its place no visitor to the valley would suppose that it concealed an opening in the rock.

Clip Saunders verified these conjectures by a personal inspection, and satisfied himself that there was no mistake about the matter.

Then he hurried back to Orodia to report his grand discovery.

It was dark when he got out of the Well Hole valley, and of course the night was far gone when he reached the settlement.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EXPLOSIVE ATTACK.

THE highly important intelligence that was brought by the lucky young scout did not create any general excitement in Orodia, simply for the reason that it was kept very quiet.

Clip Saunders did not breathe a word of it to anybody before he reported to Judge Waller, and that gentleman merely advised him to keep it to himself, knowing that his advice would be as fully heeded as the most solemn injunction.

Although Zach Stammel had been caught at his crime and made to pay the penalty, it was possible that there might be another and a smarter spy in the settlement.

At all events it was thought best that the matter should be taken in hand by the Vigilance Committee alone, and that so important an enterprise as that which they were about to undertake should be confided to none but the leaders.

There was plenty of excitement among them, however, although it was subdued and kept from the general view.

When they were aroused from their slumbers and summoned to Judge Waller's office, they knew that important developments awaited them.

In this they were not disappointed, and unstinted praise was given to Clip for his success.

Success where older and more experienced scouts had failed.

Arrangements were speedily made for sending out a sufficiently strong party at daybreak, or earlier if possible.

Then the question arose of the nature of the rat-hole, and the best mode of getting at the rats.

"As Clip Saunders describes it," said Judge Waller, "those scoundrels are very secure in their den. There seems to be but a small opening, and I suppose that they could shoot us down as fast as we went in. That makes the job a hard one."

"We will get in, though," Captain Tams declared. "The great thing was to know where to find them. We know that now, and we will be sure to get at them somehow."

"Of course, and the question is what how the somehow shall be. There are two ways of getting at them, and we can use both if we want to. We can blast them out, or we can smoke them out. If nothing else should avail, we can starve them out."

Though the arrangements for the expedition were so quietly made, and though it set out at such an early hour in the morning, it caused no little stir in the settlement, and the citizens soon had a general idea of its object, if not an entirely accurate one.

But its leaders were sure that a spy, if there should be one bold enough to make the attempt, would not be able to reach the rendezvous of the robbers sooner than they would, and they felt no apprehensions on that score.

The expedition was abundantly supplied with ammunition and provisions, as if it was the intention of the leaders—and doubtless it was—to camp on the spot until they could effect the capture of the stronghold and the extermination of the outlaws.

When they came to the mountain brook, and passed through the narrow gap into the Well Hole valley, they could not help admiring the skill which the outlaws had shown in selecting their hiding-place and concealing their tracks. At the same time it was generally admitted that it was something more than a lucky chance that had enabled Clip Saunders to hunt them to their hole.

The horses in the valley were first secured and removed, so that in any event the robbers would be "set afoot," and a camp was prepared out of range of the cliff on the south side.

Active operations were then begun without any further delay.

The section of the tree-trunk which Clip pointed out was carefully tried; but it could not

be induced to revolve, being probably fastened on the inside.

An ax was brought into use, and the vigorous blows that fell on the dry and tough wood doubtless gave the occupants of the interior a good understanding of what was going on, as there was no room for supposing that friends would knock at the door in that fashion.

The hard and knurly oak did not easily yield to the ax, and considerable time elapsed before it could be cut loose from its fastenings.

The hole in the rock that it closed was covered by the rifles of some of the best marksmen in the party, the others eagerly watching the efforts of the ax-man.

"Stand clear all!" shouted Captain Tams, when the section of the tree-trunk seemed to be about to fall.

A vigorous blow of the ax drove it from its place, and it came tumbling down with a crash, showing the chain that had held it from the inside.

The man who wielded the ax jumped away just in time to avoid several shots that were quickly fired from within.

The riflemen in the valley promptly answered this attack by sending a number of bullets into the opening; but their volley was probably as harmless as that to which they responded.

"We've got 'em now!" exclaimed Captain Tams, when all except the covering marksmen had retired out of range for consultation.

"Yes, we know that they are in there," said Judge Waller, "and of course we have got them, or are bound to get them."

It was certain that the opening which had been disclosed by the fall of the tree-trunk was so small and so easy to defend that any attempt to enter it was out of the question.

At the same time it was equally evident that the rats in the hole could not come out without being shot down.

In fact, neither party could get at the other without a great sacrifice of life.

Though the den could hardly be surpassed as a hiding-place, it was not what military men would call a tenable position, as the assailants were left free to use such means of coercion as fire and blasting-powder.

This was what they proposed to do, beginning with the blasting material.

A large cartridge of giant powder, which had been brought from Orodia for the purpose, was prepared for use, with a quick fuse attached.

This was put in the charge of Missouri Mose, an experienced and careful handler of explosives, who took his position on one side of the hole in the rock, while Captain Tams cautiously advanced to the other side.

At the same time the chosen marksmen and nearly all the rest of the party covered the opening with their rifles, keeping at a respectful distance from it.

Captain Tams, who boasted a voice which, as his admirers declared, could be heard as far as he could be seen, summoned the outlaws to surrender.

"Come out, you rascals!" he shouted at the top of that wonderful voice. "Come out and surrender, before we blow you into the hottest corner of hell!"

It seemed that his voice must penetrate to the innermost recesses of the mountain; but there was no reply.

Perhaps the outlaws were of the opinion that they might as well be blown up as strung up.

"Fair warning!" shouted Captain Tams again. "Come out and surrender, or hell will break loose among you!"

This was strong enough language; but it neither moved the mountain nor the men who were supposed to be concealed within it.

"Let 'em have it!" ordered the captain.

Missouri Mose lighted the fuse of his cartridge, drew back his arm, and slung the heavy missile in at the opening.

Then he and Captain Tams ran away at full speed, and with the others awaited the expected explosion.

It came without fail, and quite as soon as it had been bargained for.

There was a heavy rumble, and then a terrific roar, and a vast volume of dust and smoke rushed out of the opening in the rock as if expelled by a great internal convulsion.

After waiting for the effects of the explosion to subside, and neither seeing nor hearing anything of the outlaws, the Vigilantes determined to explore the interior of the cliff.

Two young and daring fellows, accompanied by Clip Saunders, entered the opening, and groped their way forward in the darkness.

They soon found the passage blocked by masses of broken rock which the terrific force of the big cartridge of giant powder had torn from the roof and sides of the cavern within.

A lantern that had been brought from Orodia was lighted, and others went in, and they moved the obstacles out of the way, and climbed over them, until they fully explored the interior.

They saw plenty of signs of its recent occupation by the robbers; but no living person did they find there.

There was one dead person, though.

Ginger, the Indian woman, lay on the rocky floor, fearfully mangled by the explosion, and a closer examination showed that she had previously been shot.

It was supposed that the outlaws, suspecting her of having betrayed them, had put her to death.

But what had become of them?

This was the mystery which the Vigilantes proceeded to solve with the aid of the lantern and other lights.

They soon found another interior passage, which led upward, and which had evidently been enlarged and improved by the labor of men.

This they ascended, the lantern at the head, and all revolvers ready for immediate action.

Up they went, and up, and up, until they thought that they must surely have reached the summit of the cliff, and then their further progress was arrested by what was unmistakably a wooden floor.

The man in the lead braced himself against the floor, and it proved to be a trap door which easily yielded to pressure.

Directly they emerged into the interior of the log house which they had visited when the first expedition struck that locality.

It was empty.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RAID ON WARNER'S RANCH.

THE men who had come up into the log-house were amazed and intensely disgusted.

They rushed out through the open door, but saw no sign of those they sought.

After all their labor and pains and great anticipations their prey had easily slipped through their fingers, and had disappeared utterly.

It was clear that at the beginning of the attack upon the log door of their den the robbers had taken the alarm, had escaped to the summit of the cliff, and by that time must be far away.

There was some consolation in knowing that they were afoot; but how long before they would be mounted?

Clip Saunders ran back beyond the log-house, and from the edge of the road called to those in the valley, bidding them look out for the horses.

When they saw him standing there they at once guessed what had happened, and prepared for a possible attack.

But the horses were safe—those that had been captured, as well as those that belonged to the Vigilantes.

They were all in the deep valley, and the outlaws would hardly attempt to pass the gap to make an attack.

There was but one route by which they could have got away from the hill on which the log-house stood. They must have climbed down where the first expedition from Orodia had ascended, and that course would take them into the trail that led to the main road.

The situation of affairs was explained to the Vigilantes below, who hastened to get their horses and traps together and leave the valley.

Soon the two parties came together at the foot of the mountain, and a brief consultation was held there.

The day was drawing toward its close, and there was no time to spare.

"What shall we do now?" asked Captain Tams.

"What will those scoundrels do?" replied Judge Waller. "If we can settle that question, our course will be plain. We have at least set them afoot, and their first move will be to try to capture some horses. Where is the nearest place they would be likely to go to to get horses?"

"Mat Warner's ranch," instantly answered Clip Saunders, and a terrible fear came over him.

"To Mat Warner's, then, my friends, and ride as if the devil kicked you!"

Over the trail through the timber, and from

there down the main road, the party galloped at the best speed of their horses; but it was nearly dark when the foremost men reached the gap that led into Mat Warner's valley.

They did not wait for those in the rear to come up, but dashed through.

The sight that met their eyes was well calculated to rouse their wrath and hurry them forward.

Matthew Warner's barn was in a bright blaze, and flames were bursting out at the side of his house.

It was at once supposed that the outlaws had gone there to steal horses, had been resisted, and in revenge had fired the buildings.

This supposition was confirmed by several dropping shots up the valley.

Clip Saunders waited for no orders and no comrades, but at once galloped away toward the conflagration.

Captain Tams, who had served in the civil war, and who was the military leader of the Vigilantes, halted a moment to form his men.

Then he sent that wonderful voice of his shrieking up the road in his usual forcible style:

"Hurry up, boys! Hell's to pay here!"

Then he shouted the stirring order to charge, and away his men went, those who had fallen behind rapidly closing up to them.

It was no imaginary or invisible foe that they were directed to charge.

The desperadoes had accomplished their purpose, but not so easily as they had hoped to.

There were a number of horses in Matthew Warner's horse-lot, and that was their objective point, especially as the stable was also there, where they might expect to find bridles and ropes for riding-gear.

But it was daylight when they reached the ranch, and their approach was signaled by the dogs, and they were quickly discovered by Warner and his men, who hastened to get their weapons and defend the horse-lot.

The struggle was, of course, a very unequal one, as they were largely outnumbered; but more than one of their assailants bit the dust before they were driven from the fence to the stable.

In their retreat one of the hands was killed, and another was badly wounded, but managed to get away.

Mat Warner and the remaining men continued the fight from the stable; but the outlaws, in their anger at the stubborn resistance, set fire to it, and soon smoked them out.

They effected a safe retreat from their imperiled position, but did not go far.

As soon as the growing darkness gave them a chance they returned, and theirs were the shots that reached the ears of their friends at the gap.

But the outlaws were left free to secure the horses and to provide themselves with riding-gear from the burning stable.

Spence Symmes and Cheyenne Charley had in the mean time been paying special attention to their own safety and their own objects.

They had been the first to get horses and mount them.

Then they rode to the house, dismounted, and went in.

Helen Warner was in the room with Harry Venn, who had gained strength, but was yet too weak to leave his bed.

The barking of dogs, the rapid firing, and the shouting of strange men, told her what was going on, and from the window she saw the attack on the horse-lot.

She closed the shutter, so that Harry should not see it.

Between her anxiety for her father and for her invalid lover she scarcely thought of her own peril.

"What is it?" asked Harry. "What is the matter?"

"It seems to be some sort of a fight," she answered. "Don't let it worry you, dear. You can do nothing, and I hope we are safe here."

"It is Spence Symmes and his gang. I am sure it is. He has come to carry you off again, and I can't move a hand to help you. Oh, this is terrible!"

"Be quiet, Harry. Have no fear for me. I have a pistol now, and know how to use it. I can protect myself."

When the footsteps were heard at the outer door she rose to her feet.

"I will be back directly, Harry," she said.

She stepped out into the passage, closing the door behind her and locking it, and drew her pistol from her pocket.

Before she could raise it she was firmly seized by Spence Symmes, whose triumphant and in-

solent gaze once more drove the color from her cheeks.

"Here I am again!" he exclaimed. "I have come, as I told you I would, and the devil himself won't get you away from me this time!"

Helen did not utter a cry. She knew that it would be useless to call for help, and feared to further alarm the invalid. Her fear was not what it would have been if she had not been once rescued from a similar peril.

The outlaw dragged her out to his horse, which he mounted, and with the assistance of Cheyenne Charley she was placed before him.

In his triumph he probably forgot the possibility of pursuit by the men who had driven his band from their dens.

By this time his followers were gathering about him, and were impatient to be off.

"Set fire to the shanty!" he shouted. "We need a good light to show us the way out."

His savage order was speedily obeyed, and he rode toward the gap at the head of his remaining followers.

Mat Warner and the farm hand who was unhurt hurried forward, firing revengeful shots at them as they went.

These were the foes that Captain Tams ordered the Vigilantes to charge, and they did charge with a will.

As they charged they fired at the mass of horsemen that suddenly appeared before them in the darkness.

The departing outlaws, astonished and overwhelmed by the unexpected arrival of their enemies, were seized by a panic, and did not even attempt to make a fight.

As the only exit for horses was closed against them, they scattered to the sides of the valley, where they dismounted and took to the hills.

Several of them were shot down before they reached shelter, and the band was so thinned and demoralized and divided, that it might be considered broken up.

Among those who succeeded in escaping were Spence Symmes and Cheyenne Charley. The latter got to the hills easily enough; but the former, being burdened with Helen Warner, was the target of a number of bullets that missed him.

When he reached the woods his pursuers were so close that it would clearly be impossible for him to take her further as an unwilling partner of his flight.

So he dismounted and ran, telling her to shift for herself.

This she was well able to do, as she had retained her senses, and had a pretty good idea of what was going on.

As soon as she was rid of the terror of his presence, she took the horse by the bridle, and led him toward her burning home.

Clip Saunders, as he galloped up the valley, saw the departing raiders, and steered to the left; but they scattered before he reached them, and he rode recklessly among and through the flying horsemen, who were too much occupied in caring for their own safety to notice him.

He rode at full speed direct to the house, where the flames were rapidly gaining headway.

Leaping from his horse, he let the animal run loose, and dashed into the house and to the door of Harry Venn's room.

The door was locked, but yielded when he threw himself against it, and the next moment he was at the bedside of the invalid.

"Never mind me, Clip," exclaimed Harry. "Nelly is gone! Spence Symmes has carried her off."

"You must be attended to now," replied Clip, as he lifted the young man from the bed, and half carried him to the passage.

At the door he met Matthew Warner, who gladly helped him with his burden, and when they got outside, there was Helen, thankful for the safety of her father and her lover.

Part of the Vigilantes assisted Mr. Warner in removing such of his household effects as could be saved; but it was impossible to extinguish the fire, and the house burned to the ground.

"Never mind," said the ranchman. "My child is safe, and that is enough for me!"

CHAPTER XVI.

LIGHT ON A DARK DEED.

It was a fact, as the young scout who followed her supposed, that the Indian woman had transferred her allegiance from the dead Sam Bunker to another of the same stripe.

It was a further fact that Cheyenne Charley was the man who had contracted to supply

her with whisky in return for her services and obedience.

The liquor that she brought from Orodia was for the joint benefit of Ginger and Cheyenne Charley; but, as it happened, Ginger got only a small portion of her share, her supply being cut off by her untimely death at the hands of the men who suspected her of having betrayed the secret of their hiding-place.

Thus the joint stock of whisky became the sole property of the man who had promised to turn over a new leaf, but had only succeeded in making some very black marks on the old page.

Before he left the den with his comrades, he loaded himself with the flasks, and in the subsequent flight and desultory combats, he was careful to keep his precious person and his precious liquor out of the reach of stray bullets.

At the first sight of the Vigilantes, as they rode from the gap toward Mat Warner's ranch, he turned and fled.

He had as yet touched the liquor but lightly, and his head was reasonably clear.

Therefore he knew that his only chance for escape was to get into the hills and the cover of the timber.

He pushed his horse toward the range on the south side of the valley, carefully selecting a point where the climbing seemed to be comparatively easy.

As soon as he reached the ascent he dismounted and took to his heels, and the timber and the darkness soon hid him from the view of the pursuing horsemen.

The fire that had lately swept over the range had partly cleared it of undergrowth, but without making much havoc among the tall trees.

Thus the darkness was a better cover for the fugitive than the foliage; but at the same time the ascent was easier than it otherwise would have been.

It was difficult enough, though, and when he reached the summit he was quite exhausted, especially as he had exerted himself to make good time for the sake of saving his precious carcass.

He was well pleased at finding himself on the fire-swept plateau and near the hole in which he and Spence Symmes had disappeared when they were between the fury of the flames and the wrath of the Vigilantes.

After listening a while, to make sure that he was not followed, he groped about in the darkness and found the hole, into which he crawled.

He stumbled through the passage, cursing his hard luck and the bruises he got on the way, until he came out in the valley or ravine below, where he considered himself safe.

The forest here had been scarcely touched by the fire, and the night was warm, and the wearied desperado, after thoroughly soaking his skin with whisky, stretched himself on the ground, and slept soundly until the sun was climbing up the eastern sky.

When he awoke he was in such a muddled condition that it was difficult for him to decide where he was or how he had got there.

But a strong pull at a whisky flask brightened him up, and enabled him to view the situation with reasonable clearness.

Two points pressed upon him severely.

In the first place, he was alone, separated from his late comrades, whom he might never see again, and was a hunted man, against whom every hand would be raised.

In the second place, he was hungry, and had not the faintest idea of how he would get anything to eat, unless something in the way of game should happen to come within range of his rifle.

But, if there was a lack of solid food, there was no lack of liquid nourishment, and he sought solace in his whisky flask so earnestly that he was liable soon to sink into a stupor.

The instructions of the Vigilantes were to scour the hills in search of the outlaws who had escaped, and to shoot down without mercy all they found who refused to surrender.

Clip Saunders, who had organized himself into a man-hunting expedition, crossed the plateau which Cheyenne Charley had been glad to reach the night before, and looked about in search of prey.

It seemed advisable to him to search the hole which he had previously explored; but, before doing so, he looked over the edge of the steep southern side of the ridge.

Down there in the ravine he saw a man seated on the ground, his back against a tree, and in his hand a flask which he frequently applied to his lips.

The lad thought that he recognized Cheyenne Charley, and sought a place where he could climb down and make sure.

In the ravine he cautiously approached the drinking man, made certain of his identity, and hid where he could watch him at his leisure.

Soon he had the satisfaction of seeing him tumble over and fall asleep.

This was the opportunity that Clip wanted.

He might easily have killed the outlaw as he sat there; but he had another use for him, and he was opposed to shedding blood if it could be avoided.

He quietly stepped up to the prostrate man, removed his rifle and hid it, and cautiously abstracted his revolver from his belt.

Then he stirred him pretty vigorously with his foot.

As the stirring was not a success, he shook him and punched him soundly, until he opened his eyes and sat up.

When the outlaw got awake, and was able to take a confused glimpse of the situation, he saw himself confronted by a resolute young man with a leveled revolver.

Perceiving his danger, he reached for his own pistol; but it was gone, and his rifle was also invisible.

He easily recognized the fact that he was at an extreme disadvantage, and that there was nothing for him to do but to submit to such terms as his foe chose to dictate.

"What do you want?" he sulkily demanded.

"I want you," answered Clip, "and I have got you now where I want you."

"What do you want of me?"

"I want you to tell me something."

"Fire ahead, then. What is it?"

"Who killed my sister?"

"Who killed my sister?" repeated the outlaw in a maudlin way. "Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the sparrow, with my bow an' arrow."

"You had better be careful how you speak to me. You are at my mercy, and I mean to get the truth out of you. Who killed my sister?"

"Who are you, anyhow, young chap?"

"You know me as well as I know you. I am Clifton Saunders, and you are Charles Rentz. My sister was Meta Saunders. You were about our place in Kansas when she disappeared, and you left just before her body was found. You know who killed her."

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't."

"I am sure that you do know, and you must tell me. Was it you?"

"No. As sure's you live it wasn't me. I had nothing to do with her anyway. The man who killed her was powerful fond of her."

"Who was he?"

"What'll you do if I won't tell?"

"I will tie you and hand you over to the Vigilantes, who are on your track, and they will hang you."

"You will do that if I do tell?"

"Tell me the name of that man, Charles Rentz, and you may go free."

"All right, if you will give me that chance. It was Spence Symmes."

"The man I suspected. Why did he kill her?"

"He was powerful fond of her, as I said, and when he met her there on the road, and she told him that she hated him, he was so mad that he shot her. Then he left the country. As I was with him when he did the trick, I thought I had better skip, too."

"That is enough, Charles Rentz. Go, now, and make the most of your chance."

The outlaw, who had been considerably sobered by this interview; walked away, slowly but steadily.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNEQUAL DUEL.

CLIP SAUNDERS looked after the receding form of Cheyenne Charley until he was out of sight.

Then he placed the captured revolver in his belt, and examined the captured rifle.

He stood there, with a far-away look in his eyes, a dark frown on his brow, and his lips compressed.

What he had just heard had evidently moved him to the depths of his nature.

"At last," he said, "I know who was the murderer of my sister. I am sure that the scoundrel I turned loose spoke the truth, or I would not have spared him. It was not for nothing that I came here in search of the man I suspected. I must find him now, and if I do find him the Vigilantes will not need to hang him, for I have sworn that he shall die by my hand."

The breaking of a twig near by arrested his attention.

He looked in the direction of the sound, and saw the man he sought.

Spence Symmes had not been having an easy time since the disastrous conclusion of the raid upon Mat Warner's ranch.

Indeed it may be doubted if any of the band who were alive and unwounded had experienced a harder time than the leader.

He was so badly "frustrated" by the arrival of the Vigilantes, and by the failure of his second attempt to secure possession of Helen Warner, that he was not at the time of his flight as cool and clear-sighted as he was wont to be.

Consequently he did not use such care and forethought as Cheyenne Charley did in selecting his place of exit from the valley.

It is likely, too, that the shots which were aimed at him more than at any other unsettled his nerves.

He started up the hill at a point where it was remarkably steep and rough, and had a very difficult climb before he could consider himself out of the way of bullets.

He was yet at a considerable distance from the top when darkness closed in upon him so thickly that he could scarcely see as much as a tree before him.

Then he became entangled with rocks and fallen trees and ravines, so that he completely lost his way, and was strongly tempted to stop and wait for daylight.

But he pressed on and up, until he stumbled in the darkness, and fell into a gully.

Instinctively he threw out his hands as he went down, and caught a projecting rock, to which he clung until he could collect his senses and steady himself for further efforts.

He had no way of judging the depth of the ravine; but it seemed to be easier and less dangerous to descend than to ascend, and he groped his way downward with great difficulty, reaching the bottom in a badly bruised and exhausted condition.

There he was content to stay and rest, and he slept well, in spite of the roughness of his rocky bed.

In the morning he looked for his rifle, which had of course dropped from his grasp when he tumbled into the gully.

He found it; but it was ruined, the lock and the stock having both been broken by the fall.

This was a real disaster, as he felt himself to be, without his rifle, no better than a sneak and a tramp.

He needed food, which he could not expect to get by killing game with his revolver, and although there were people here and there on whom he had been accustomed to depend for supplies, they would be as likely in his hour of defeat to betray him as to assist him.

He fully realized the fact that his only chance was to creep out of the country, and that it was not a brilliant chance at the best.

The course of the gully led toward the south, and he followed it downward until he came out at the bottom of a deep ravine.

His clothes, in which he had always taken much pride, were torn and soiled, and his face and hands were bruised and bloody. He knew that he cut a sorry figure; but he did not expect to meet anybody, and surely did not desire to.

His surprise and disgust were great, therefore, when, as he was walking westward along the ravine, he suddenly found himself confronted by Clip Saunders and a leveled rifle.

He knew Clip well, and had cause to dread him, not only because of his past, but because he believed the lad to have been connected with his recent disasters.

"Halt, there!" ordered Clip, and Spence Symmes halted.

"What do you want?" he asked, in just such a tone as Cheyenne Charley had used when he asked the same question.

"I want you," answered Clip. "I have just seen your partner, Charles Rentz, and I have forced the truth from him. I now know who it was that killed my sister, Meta Saunders, who was foully murdered in Kansas."

"Are you sure of that?" replied Symmes.

"I am sure that you are the man."

The outlaw turned ashy pale, and his fierce eyes drooped.

There could be no doubt that the thought of that deed was a dark spot in his memory.

Then he looked up, coolly and defiantly.

"What are you going to do about it?" he demanded, in a hoarse voice.

"I am going to kill you," replied Clip.

"Don't you think it would be better to turn

the job over to your friends, the Vigilantes, who would be glad of the chance to hang me?"

"I have sworn that I will kill you with my own hand."

"Well, as I look at you just now, you seem to be able to do it, as you have a rifle, and I have none. Go on with your killing, young man."

"I don't need to use the rifle," replied Clip, who was angered by the cool and nonchalant manner of his antagonist.

He pitched the rifle far from the reach of either of them.

"Your pistol will do the work then, as I have nothing to match it," sneered Symmes. "But that would scarcely look like killing me with your own hand."

Clip threw away the pistol, and drew his long knife.

"I will kill you with this," he said.

As quick as thought the outlaw drew a revolver from under his coat, and smiled as he cocked it.

"I think you had better postpone that killing business," said he. "If you stir a step I will shoot you down in your tracks."

But Clip Saunders had already formed his resolution, and he carried it out with the quickness of lightning.

He leaped forward as if he had been shot out of a cannon, and the gleam of the knife told his deadly purpose.

Spence Symmes, flurried by this sudden onset, fired two hasty shots, one of which missed the mark entirely, and the other struck the lad's left arm.

Before he could fire again the keen blade had passed through his neck, and he fell on the ground, his life-blood gushing forth in a torrent.

Matthew Warner and two of the Vigilantes, who had been scouring the forest in that direction, came running to the spot, attracted by the pistol-shots.

A few words put them in possession of the facts.

"His life was owed to me, and I have collected the debt," said Clip.

"I am afraid you have spoiled him for hanging," said Mat Warner.

"I meant to make a sure thing. If you want something to do, you may tie up my arm, as he has put a hole through it."

In a few minutes, and without being able to speak, Spence Symmes breathed his last, and was left there to the birds and beasts of prey.

Clip Saunders's arm was attended to, and he accompanied Mat Warner to the place where he had found a refuge for Helen and Harry Venn.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF.

THE Vigilantes were resolute and thorough in their purpose of exterminating the band of robbers that had been the terror of the region about Orodia.

When they had found their hiding-place and driven them from it, they lost no time and omitted no effort in the work of clearing them out.

Day after day, and night after night, they searched the hills and forests for stray members of the gang that had claimed Spence Symmes as a leader.

They strictly obeyed their instructions, and shot down without mercy all they found who refused to surrender.

Those who surrendered—and they were very few in number—were hanged, as a farmer nails dead hawks on his barn as a warning to other hawks.

Even the isolated settlers—not always unsuspected of sharing the booty of the plunderers—from whom they had been accustomed to seek shelter and supplies, turned against them, refused them the slightest favor, and aided in hunting them down.

They could only die or leave the country, and the few who got away considered themselves very fortunate.

Thus the region was finally cleared of its worst characters, and it was no longer necessary to post on houses or cabins or tepees the skull and crossbones and mystic numbers of the Vigilantes.

Among the few outlaws that were not discovered by the men who scoured the country was Cheyenne Charley.

How he escaped their thorough and persistent search nobody knew but himself, and he could not have explained it if he had been put to the torture.

"A fool for luck" was the proverb that possibly might account for it.

He had wandered aimlessly about, stupefied with liquor, and nearly famished for food, and had simply happened to stray out of the way of those who were seeking him.

When his whisky was exhausted, and he had no means of procuring anything to satisfy his hunger, the terrors of starvation came upon him, and he ventured to stop at a ranch and beg for food and shelter.

He was promptly arrested as a suspicious character, and taken to Orodia.

There he was marched to Judge Waller's office, and the judge declared that a more woe-begone, bedraggled, miserable and broken-down specimen of a tramp had never appeared before him.

A council of the leaders of the Vigilantes was held to determine his fate, and the decision quickly was that he should be hung by the neck until he was very dead indeed.

"This is the man," said Judge Waller, "who came to me and assured me that he was going to turn over a new leaf. What sort of a leaf is it that you think you have been turning over, you wretched bound?"

Cheyenne Charley, who was in the depths of sorrow and the valley of humiliation, had not a word to say for himself.

But there was one who had a word to say for him.

This was no other than Clip Saunders, who, as Judge Waller's right-hand man, was considered a privileged character, and who was present at the council, with his left arm in a sling.

Clip spoke of the broken-down outlaw as a poor devil, and suggested that he should have a legal trial by the proper authorities.

"But he has killed two women," said Judge Waller.

"That's a fact, sir, and a little while ago I would have been glad to help string him up; but he is so completely used up that I would hate to see him hung just now."

Strange to say, the others gave in to the lad's opinion, and Cheyenne Charley was held for a regular trial.

A young lawyer who was anxious to distinguish himself took up his case, and, although the outlaw was convicted of murder, the law's delays interfered to prevent the execution of his sentence, until finally he turned over a new leaf by escaping from prison.

Matthew Warner, assisted by the settlers whom he called his neighbors, erected new buildings in the place of those that had been destroyed by the outlaws, and made a home for Helen, who was married to Harry Venn when he had fully recovered from his wounds.

Orodia grew and flourished, and became a place of importance in the large county in which it was located.

About a year after the events herein recorded the political pot began to boil in that section, and among other offices that were to be filled at the approaching election was that of sheriff.

At a conference of the leading men in and about Orodia, most of whom had been members of the Vigilance Committee, Judge Waller took occasion to express his opinion in these words:

"Orodia is entitled to name the sheriff this year, and that right will be conceded to us. We have only to put forward a good man, and I believe that I am entirely justified in naming for the office my young friend, Clifton Saunders, who was largely instrumental in cleaning out the Spence Symmes gang of scoundrels, and who is known to us all as being capable and in every way worthy."

It was suggested that Clip was very young.

"He is getting older every day," replied the judge. "He has shown courage and capacity beyond his years. We want a young and active man for the position, and if my word counts for anything he will be our next sheriff."

His word did count for something, and at the election Clip Saunders had a good majority, and became the youngest sheriff then in the United States.

THE END.

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